

RIDDLEHOARD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Creative Writing and English

University of Regina

by

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Regina, Saskatchewan

October 2012

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**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH**  
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## ABSTRACT

*Riddlehoard* is a collection of literary riddles inspired by the Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book. *Riddlehoard* describes objects that fall into three categories: objects accessible to the Anglo-Saxons, often because they pertain to the natural world; technological items largely unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; and objects that self-consciously reflect on the act of riddling. *Riddlehoard* explores metaphor as interactive, mysterious, and playful and suggests an underlying absurdity to subjective human experience.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The guidance, encouragement, and editorial comments provided by my supervisor, Dr. Medrie Purdham, were invaluable during the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Trussler, who has taught me so much about writing, and Dr. Cameron Louis for taking the time to teach me Old English.

I would like to acknowledge the funding I received from a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship provided by the Social Studies and Humanities Research Council, a Dr. Morris Shumiatcher Scholarship in English, various teaching and research assistantships from the Department of English and University of Regina, and a SSHRC Enhancement Award and Research Graduate Scholarship from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.

I am grateful to the editors of *CV2*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Society*, and *The Fieldstone Review* for publishing versions of some of these riddles.

## **POST DEFENSE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

Thank you to my External Examiner Carmine Starnino for his insight into the genre of riddles.

For my family & Nathan

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	iii
<b>POST DEFENSE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b>	iv
<b>DEDICATION</b>	v
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>I. SAY WHAT I AM CALLED</b>	35
I smile earwide	36
Leave her and she swells	37
He harnesses a rage	38
These men dig fingers	39
Split us down the middle	40
She'll quench your thirst	41
He tears crevices	42
I grew out of her torment	43
These phantoms floated	44
Listen as it sings	45
I scattered my sons	46
Dressed in white caps	48
I grew in slumber	49
His spine was strong	50
Man's siren and muse	51
His arms poised	52
Dragged from the garden	53
It welcomes men	55
My skin was polished	56
Watch sparks fly	57

It left a long trail	58
A whisper caught	59
<b>II. MY FACE IS MY MASK</b>	<b>60</b>
I must wait as he sings	61
Beat him and he stifles	62
I'm a breeding ground	63
My heart remains hard	64
He grabs me by the wrist	65
Witness his feats	66
His voice was low	67
Dust filled my lungs	68
She's a stubborn slave	69
A patchwork brigade	70
They stand unflinching	72
I whisper softly	73
I soar below stands	74
My arms are sharp	75
My soul rushes	76
His life's fuel	77
I can pick up a tune	78
With dozens of fingers	79
Their shells were hard	80
With one circle-eye	81
They prance in woodland	82
A pair of eyes	83
Sprouting towards sky	84
<b>III. TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE</b>	<b>86</b>

Led to the cliff's edge	87
Her skin was wearied	88
His golden glint	89
The crack of his whip	90
He sang charms	91
He flooded the earth	92
Beneath a golden altar	93
His life's work	94
Point towards it	95
What hearts pulsed	96
Repeat this prayer	97
I dug my fingers	98
This magician wove	99
His servants fed me	100
Its branched arms	101
What ink stained	102
What mastery he holds	103
I trill as finches	104
These creatures surround	105
As time leads	106
Its petrified bones	107
A gathering of trees	108
I swallowed salt	109
Let crisp vellum	110
I sift through soil	111
<b>SOLUTIONS TO RIDDLES</b>	112
<b>NOTES ON POEMS</b>	114
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	115

Lyt ic wende  
þæt ic ær oþþe sið æfre sceolde  
ofer meodubence muðleas spreca,  
wordum wrixlan.  
(Riddle 60)

\*\*\*

I did not dream  
That someday I should speak, slip words  
Over benches, mouthless in the mead-hall.  
(Williamson, 120)

## Introduction

*Riddlehoard* is a collection of poems inspired by the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book, which infuse the non-human world with life and often speech. Riddles are similar to other forms of poetry in that they present the world in a new way through imagery and metaphor. Riddles are unlike other forms of poetry, however, because they leave out the metaphor's tenor, or "answer," and directly invite the reader to solve the puzzle they have created. Many poems mask metaphorical meaning from readers, but riddles are paradoxically overt in their concealment and bring attention to this process of interpretation. In *Poetics*, Aristotle writes, "the essence of a riddle is to express true facts under impossible combinations. Now this cannot be done by any arrangement of ordinary words, but by the use of metaphor it can" (1458a). Riddles, in their formal and conceptual constraints, explore metaphor as innately interactive, mysterious, and playful.

In *Riddlehoard* I explore the gap between the literal and the metaphorical, between subjective experience and the world of material things, and between a given question and its concealed answer. Thematically, my manuscript describes objects that fall into three categories: objects accessible to the Anglo-Saxons, often because they

pertain to the natural world; technological items largely unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; and objects that self-consciously reflect on the act of riddling. By imitating the form of Old English riddles, which are generally unfamiliar to modern readers through the distance of time and their use of accentual verse, I seek to defamiliarize encounters with everyday objects.

My riddles acknowledge a dual audience; I am writing to a modern reader to whom the form of Old English riddles written in alliterative verse is unfamiliar, and also to an imagined Anglo-Saxon reader to whom parts of the world I describe are unfamiliar. Part one, in its imitation of Old English alliterative verse and subject matter, works to estrange the reading experience of modern audiences. Part two, in its description of mainly contemporary objects, strives to distance the reading experience of an imagined Anglo-Saxon reader. Part three, which describes specific encounters with artefacts and differs from the traditional form of Old English alliterative verse in its use of rhyme, explores an existential riddling that reflects on the form and extends to questions beyond the page.

### **History and Definition**

The riddle is born out of the oral folk tradition of nearly every culture, including ancient Chinese, Indian, and Old Norse civilizations. Old English riddles developed from Latin riddles of Aldhelm and Symphosius, and the main difference between Old English riddles and Latin riddles is significant: a Latin riddle names its subject in its title, while the subject of an Old English riddle is concealed from the reader. Elizabeth Hickman DuBois' translation of Symphosius' anchor riddle and Craig Williamson's translation of

the Old English anchor riddle demonstrate this difference. The Latin poem names its object:

LXI Ancora  
My double points in one by iron bound,  
With winds I struggle, fight with gulfs profound,  
I search the waters and I bite the ground. (DuBois 43)

The Old English riddle conceals the solution:

In battle I rage against wave and wind,  
Strive against storm, dive down seeking  
A strange homeland, shrouded by the sea.  
In the grip of war, I am strong when still;  
In battle-rush, rolled and ripped  
In flight. Conspiring wind and wave  
Would steal my treasure, strip my hold,  
But I seize glory with a guardian tail  
As the clutch of stones stands hard  
Against my strength. Can you guess my name? (Williamson 74)

Many critics argue that a sense of literary play is gained in the Anglo-Saxon riddles, as compared to the Latin riddles. In the anchor riddles above, both poems describe the anchor's battle to stand strong against the raging sea. In the Latin riddle, the anchor's struggle with wind and waves is described only briefly. The Old English riddle describes a similar scene but gives greater detail and focus on the speaker's arduous battle. The Old English anchor also emphasizes the treasure of glory attained through holding its place, and consequently features fuller imagery than the Latin poem.

Craig Williamson writes in *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo Saxon Riddle Songs*, "the Latin riddles parade without play. They lack the imaginative power which allows the poet to sense, sing, and celebrate the nonhuman world about him" (8). The Latin riddles are shorter than the Old English riddles, and usually offer only one motif or analogy rather than the detailed images found in the Old English riddles. However, by naming their

objects overtly, the Latin riddles force readers to hold two ideas—the literal object and its enigmatic qualities— simultaneously in their minds, thereby estranging the reader’s preconceptions of the object and promoting a novel view of the world. The Latin riddles offer an existential riddle rather than simply a word game or puzzle, and it is for this reason that the Latin riddles are of interest to my project. In many of my later riddles, I have been inspired by the Latin riddles’ overt naming of objects, which removes emphasis from the utilitarian task of solving the riddle. In “His golden glint,” a riddle describing a cameo of Emperor Claudius, for instance, I name Claudius in the first line; in this poem I am more concerned with exploring Claudius’ transformation into an art object than with concealing the riddle’s answer.

In examining how metaphor operates in riddles, I have found useful the terms *vehicle* and *tenor*, terms made popular by I. A. Richards, but used by various critics in definitions of metaphor. As M. H. Abrams notes in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, the tenor refers to the literal subject of a metaphor while the vehicle refers to the metaphorical comparison (119). In *Reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Don Paterson extends this vocabulary of the metaphor to define riddles. He suggests, “a riddle is a metaphor which consists of a vehicle and a text-absent and often concrete tenor” (23). Paterson’s mention of an absent tenor is significant; the gap between a concept, or vehicle, and a literal object, or tenor, is present in the literary riddle in a different manner than in other metaphors; in the riddle, the reader must guess the solution of the riddle, or its tenor. In most riddles, the vehicle represents the series of clues metaphorically describing the object, while the tenor refers to the solution itself.

With its text-absent tenor overtly inviting the reader to offer a solution, the riddle seems well suited to a meditation on metaphor and the nature of literary interpretation, inspiring the self-reflection of many of my poems. In “Her skin was wearied,” a riddle describing petroglyphs, for instance, the text-absent tenor allows the speaker to explore the fleetingness of the written word. Through the speaker’s encounter with “grooves carved in stone,” or the mysterious petroglyphs left by First Nations visitors centuries before, the speaker acknowledges the innate paradox of metaphor. Like the author of the Old English riddles, the petroglyphs’ creator is absent from the speaker’s encounter. While the creature is able to sing secrets, or speak through metaphorical symbols, the speaker is “left only a trace of her touch.” Other poems in *Riddlehoard* engage overtly with the idea of how metaphor operates. In “This magician wove,” I present the poet as weaving the warp and weft into tapestry, or turning words into poetry. In “I trill as finches,” I explore the dual identity of metaphor; metaphor is “Light as heartspeech,” but its song also resonates “deeper than any mortal man can hear.” Metaphor is simultaneously knowable and unknowable; it is through its familiar song that metaphor allows us to gain a sense of what might otherwise remain hidden.

### **Alliterative Verse**

As Peter Baker notes in his *Introduction to Old English*, Old English poetry uses accentual metre rather than the accentual-syllabic metre such as iambic pentameter with which we are primarily familiar in modern poetry. Baker comments, “in Old English poetry, only the alliteration of lifts is significant” (124); Old English poetry counts only stresses, and ignores unstressed syllables including prefixes of words, and prepositions.

In addition, Anglo-Saxon poetry is written in half-lines (hemistichs) of two stresses each. Of these four stresses per line, at least two stresses must alliterate with one another. Furthermore, the combination sounds *sc*, *sp*, and *st* are only allowed to alliterate with one another and not with other *s* sounds (Baker 124). On the other hand, soft-*g* and hard-*g* sounds are able to alliterate with one another, and *ch* and hard-*c* sounds also alliterate with one another (Baker 124). Generally, the first stress of the second half-line supplies the main alliterative sound and is thus the strongest stress, while the second stress of the second half-line does not usually alliterate with the other three stressed sounds. In one single half-line of poetry, there is a maximum of two stressed syllables, but an unlimited number of unstressed syllables, which creates a variety of line lengths.

Further, weak syllables such as pronouns and prepositions are often grouped together at the beginning of a line, prefacing the stronger words and sounds (Baker 126). *The Seafarer* demonstrates weak syllables clustered together at the beginning of the line: “Mæg ic be me selfum soð-giedd wrecan, / siðas secgan, hu ic geswinc-dagum” (1-2). This habit of grouping weaker syllables together combined with the presence of unlimited unstressed syllables tends to create a range of seemingly unpredictable rhythms perhaps similar to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ notion of sprung rhythm, which is heavily influenced by the alliterative verse of the Anglo-Saxons. Hopkins’ verse demonstrates how modern poets have used alliteration in order to emphasise musicality. My own usage of alliteration follows the majority of rules for Old English alliterative verse including writing in half-lines of two stressed syllables each. I am less careful about only alliterating *s* combination sounds with one another, as my goal is to create musicality in my verse that is led by alliteration but not totally ruled by it. I feel that the constraints

posed by Old English alliterative verse encourage ingenuity on the poet and that sound forces sense, or impels the meaning of a phrase. An emphasis on the sound of poetry harkens back to the oral tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry and the pre-paleographic history of poetry. This musicality is important to retain in the genre of riddling, which risks alienating the reader in its abundance of word games, puns, self-reflexivity, and other elements that are heightened on the page.

Old English differs significantly from Modern English in that the stresses of Old English fall primarily at the beginning of the word. The stresses of Modern English, which has adopted many words from the French and Italian, often fall at the end of the word and emphasize rhyme instead of an initial alliteration. In his introduction to his translation of the *Anglo Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book*, Paul F. Baum describes the difficulty of retaining the feel of Old English alliterative verse, which favours stressing the beginning of a word, in Modern English translations, which often stress the end of a word:

Modern imitations of the Anglo-Saxon long line of four main stresses, with two, often three, alliterating syllables to the line, have usually been unsatisfactory. Hence in the following versions I have settled for a loose line, generally of four stresses, with as much alliteration as comes without forcing—a middle ground between strict meter and rhythmic prose, avoiding, or at least diminishing, the iambic movement which has dominated English verse for so long, which our ear has lately learned to do without and which the Anglo-Saxon ear never knew. (xii-xiv)

While I am not engaging in a translation of the Exeter Book Riddles, the difficulty of imitating alliterative verse in Modern English is nonetheless a crucial issue to my project. I have found that unless I decide to write poems in Old English, it is impossible to imitate Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse precisely. For the purposes of *Riddlehoard*, I have found it

most useful to use alliteration as my primary mode of imitating Anglo-Saxon metre while at the same time using modern elements such as end rhyme and at certain points, iambic pentameter. In “Beneath a golden altar,” a poem describing the bones of Saint Ambrose, for instance, I use end rhymes coupled with the description of a sleeping figure in order to evoke a mood of fairy tales. Baum criticizes Charles W. Kennedy’s Old English translations, stating, “Professor Kennedy’s [translation] is a careful compromise with the strict alliterative formulas, but ends by being almost too smooth, with concession to modern iambicism” (xix). I have been wary of conceding to modern metrics in my riddles; I feel, however, that I am able to strike a balance between the linguistic idiosyncrasies of Old English metre and Modern English stresses without compromising rhythm.

### **Poetic Devices**

Apart from alliterative metre and hemistichic form, additional elements of Anglo-Saxon poetry that I have used include archaisms, kennings, caesurae, formulaic phrases, and double entendres. Old English poetry uses a special vocabulary consisting of words found exclusively in poetry. Some of these words include “mearh” instead of “hors” (meaning horse), and a large number of words for warrior including “beorn,” “guma,” and “rinc.” Baker asserts that some poetic words are dialectal, while others are likely archaisms (134). This prevalence of archaisms and dialectal vocabulary might suggest that the Anglo-Saxons were aware of tradition and in many ways responded to their own predecessors. In my poems I use archaisms in order to continue this sense of tradition and metaphorically converse with the Anglo-Saxons. In some poems, I make use of various

words that are not typically used in conversational speech such as “snood” and “maw.” In other cases, I have taken this usage of archaisms further by integrating Old English vocabulary into my poems. In a few poems, I use the words “scop” meaning poet, and “wyrd” meaning fate. In order to maintain a degree of readability for those who may not be familiar with Old English vocabulary, I have limited my usage of Old English words. If the reader is unable to translate the meaning of the word, it is my hope that the sound of the line will drive its sense.

Since Anglo-Saxon poetry is mainly guided by alliterative sounds, it is fitting that Old English poets employed a great number of synonyms in their wordhoard, or the toolbox of vocabulary at their disposal. Archaisms provided Old English poets with a variety of synonyms they could use to form lines of alliterative verse. But when Anglo-Saxon poets wished to write a particular word beginning with a particular sound, and had no such word at their disposal, they simply created it. Anglo-Saxon poetry therefore makes great use of compound words and kennings. Compound words combine two words together to form a new word, wherein both elements are retained conceptually. Baker gives many examples of compounds for *rinc*, or warrior (135). In the word “beadorinc,” or “battle-warrior,” for example, both elements of the word are given equal conceptual footing. Compound words are found frequently in modern German, with some compounds adding six or seven elements together. Compounds are less frequent in Modern English, but are still found in words like “doghouse” or “flowerbed,” which grant literal and equal meaning to each component. In *Riddlehoard* some of the compounds I have created include “breathbated,” and “wheyfaces,” and “featherlight.”

Kennings are similar to compounds, but they perform a metaphorical task, as well. In *A Feast of Creatures*, Craig Williamson writes, “In Old English poetry the kernel form of riddlic metaphor is the kenning, a Nordic device for calling something by a name it is not, then modifying it with a contextual clue” (29). The kenning is a type of miniature riddle wherein two words are combined into a new word that expresses a metaphorical concept. The kenning, which yokes together two words, is also a visual representation of the juxtaposition that occurs in all metaphor. Some examples of kennings to which Baker refers include “hronrad,” which literally translates to “whale-road,” but metaphorically refers to the sea, and “banhus,” which literally translates to “bone-house,” but metaphorically refers to the human body. One kenning I’ve invented and used in *Riddlehoard* is “woundhue,” which refers to blood. While I have not invented many kennings, I have found the metaphorical possibilities of the kenning nonetheless intriguing; the kenning acknowledges the importance of metaphor in enabling us to view and describe the world in new ways.

Many editors of Old English poetry use a caesura to reflect the half-lines typical of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and I have used this tool in my own riddles. As Baker notes, “scribes always wrote poetry from margin to margin as if it were prose” (161). Scribes usually symbolized half-lines using a punctuation mark such as a dot or raised line. When editors of Old English later converted poems into half-lines that reflect their metrical elements, they used a caesura, or three to four blank spaces, as an editorial tool to signify this pause. To modern readers, then, the caesurae trailing down the middle of each poem represent an immediate divide between the Old English poems as they were written, and the versions with which we are familiar today. I feel the caesurae in my riddles also

represent the distance between my experiences of the world and the Anglo-Saxons' experiences of the world.

Many Old English poems are heavily formulaic, making use of common phrases, themes, and tropes with significant variation. In the case of the third-person riddles, in which a nameless speaker describes a creature he has seen or heard, most riddles begin with the phrase "I have seen a creature," or "I have heard of a creature." Further, most Old English riddles written in the third person end with the taunt "say what I mean," and many first-person riddles end with the phrase "say what I am called." I have used this formula in many of my riddles with some variation. In some of my riddles, I use phrases that invite the reader to guess the name of the creature that I am describing. In some cases, I have used a variation on this formulaic phrase to taunt the reader; many of my riddles in Part III of *Riddlehoard* describe very specific artefacts that many readers are unlikely to guess. By using the formulaic taunt in these poems, the overt emphasis on solving the riddle speaks to the difficulty and absurdity of such a task.

While I use formulaic phrases most often at the beginning of each riddle and the end of each riddle, I have also borrowed formulaic phrases and kennings from *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and other Old English and contemporary texts. In borrowing formulaic kennings such as "treebreakers," and "slaughterdew" directly from Old English poems, I hoped to infuse my riddles with a sense of the past. In other riddles, intertextuality serves as a set of additional clues to the riddle's solution. For instance, in "A gathering of trees," a riddle describing an encounter with Robert Frost's stone house and gravesite in Vermont, the line, "a lover's quarrel with the world" is borrowed from Frost's "A Lesson for Today." This line, which appears on Frost's epitaph, serves as a

clue to the poem's solution, or the speaker's encounter with Frost's grave marking. In poems like "I swallowed salt," which describes Odysseus, and "What mastery he holds," which describes Orpheus, I borrow mythological figures from canonical texts, suggesting an encyclopaedic urge inherent in my use of intertextuality.

### **Metaphorical Focus**

While research on Old English riddles has typically focused on explicating literal clues and determining concrete solutions, Patrick J. Murphy's recent study *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* argues that most critics have ignored the metaphorical framework that informs each poem. Murphy refers to the riddle's vehicle as its proposition and the tenor as its solution, and he suggests that when reading and solving literary riddles, the reader typically experiences a sense of failure when the solution does not appear to account for the proposition. He writes, "many fables, like traditional riddles, seem rather disconnected from their assigned morals or 'solutions'; such resolutions often fail to satisfy" (37). There is occasionally a disappointing disjunction between the solution the reader expects based on the riddle's description of the object, and the solution as posited by scholars and editors. Murphy accounts for this disjunction between proposition and solution by the existence of a third component to the literary riddle, which he describes as a metaphorical focus. Murphy suggests that many riddles are composed of a metaphorical framework that may refer to scripture such as Adam and Eve's exile from Eden, mythological tales, or themes that otherwise grant metaphorical focus to a riddle:

A riddle's "focus," as I employ the term in this book, is a core metaphor shaping the proposition's obfuscation. It is a misnaming (whether actually stated or not) that accounts for a larger pattern of semantic "slim chances"

in the riddle's description. Or put it this way: the riddle's metaphorical focus is the expected response of an imagined solver who took the riddle much too literally. (47)

The metaphorical focus is the aspect of the riddle, commonly an extended metaphor, that helps organize the clues of the vehicle that lead to each riddle's solution. Murphy writes, "reading the Exeter riddles may demand a more nuanced approach than simply adding up the clues" (53). The metaphorical framework allows for detailed readings that do justice to the complexity of each poem. With Murphy's notion of metaphorical focus, the Exeter Book riddles are not completed when a literal solution is proposed and found to be satisfactory; the proposition of the riddles are not a means to the end of the solution. Rather, Murphy's notion of metaphorical focus shows that the Exeter Book riddles are complicated poems that render metaphorical meaning and substance past their literal solutions.

Murphy comments that the metaphorical focus is commonly mistaken for the solution of the riddle. When the speaker says, "Say what I am called," the reader may mistakenly interpret the extended metaphor literally and name the clues that describe the object as a poem's solution instead of naming the text-absent object as the solution. Murphy writes: "The riddle's focus is one thing, its solution something else altogether, and to speak of "double solutions" (even in the case of riddles involving sexual innuendo) is to confuse the question" (59). However, the tendency of critics to propose double solutions is common, especially in the case of the sex riddles, which use double entendre to mask the creature's literal solution. Because the metaphorical focus of the Old English sex riddles is much more apparent than in other riddles, they bring to light what is present

in many other riddles and exemplify Murphy's notion of the shifting presence of metaphorical focus.

In the Old English riddle describing bread dough, translated by Richard Wilbur as "I Saw in a Corner Something Swelling," the metaphorical focus or double entendre alludes to a woman giving a man an erection:

I saw in a corner something swelling,  
Reading, rising and raising its cover.  
A lovely lady, a lord's daughter,  
Buried her hands in that boneless body,  
Then covered with a cloth the puffed-up creature. (321)

Once the reader becomes aware of the poem's literal solution of bread dough, the poem's sexual metaphor drifts in and out of focus, allowing the reader to consider both ideas concurrently. In Wilbur's translation, the metaphorical focus and literal solution then lend one another additional implications; the sensual qualities of baking are emphasized, and a link is drawn between physical hunger and sexual hunger, or the sustenance of bread and the promise of fertility. When the reader shares Murphy's understanding of metaphorical focus, the riddle grants its interpreter additional meaning past its initial "solution."

In *Riddlehoard*, I have written some riddles with a very overt metaphorical focus. My own versions of double entendre riddles seek to highlight each poem's metaphorical focus. "Leave her and she swells," for instance, describes a woman on the cusp of orgasm, but I had imagined the literal solution as a teakettle boiling water. As in Wilbur's translation of the dough riddle, I hope that readers will hold both concepts concurrently in their minds, as one or the other is given emphasis or "shifts into focus." On the other hand, I had envisioned the metaphorical focus in "Dragged from the garden" as the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the poem's literal solution as a fur coat.

This poem engages in intertextuality not only with Christian narratives but also with Riddle 13 of the Exeter Book, which Murphy suggests describes the exile of Adam and Eve (Murphy 57). In metaphorically describing this exile but literally describing a fur coat, I also engage with man's dominion over animals as expressed in Genesis. In other riddles, the division between metaphorical focus and solution is not so clear; in "He sang charms," the metaphorical focus describes Rumpelstiltskin, but since I imagined Rumpelstiltskin as a riddler, the answer to the poem might merely be "the riddler"—Rumpelstiltskin or any other.

In other poems, I did not imagine a specific text or mythology to draw on for my metaphorical focus, but rather certain themes I wanted to emphasize. In "They stand unflinching," a riddle describing parking meters, the metaphorical focus describes an environment wherein citizens must cohere to strict rules or face dire consequences: "To sate their decrees each drudge must pay / a toll, and place their tariff into the pig's bank" (7-8). In making the comparison between the minor annoyance of plugging a meter and the horror of living in a police state, I hoped to use metaphorical focus to hyperbolic ends. On the other hand, my riddle describing cochineal pigment, "Their shells were hard," is fairly literal in its description of baking and crushing insects into red dye. However, even in this poem, I use metaphorical focus to emphasize the spiritual act of transcendence that I imagined the insects experience: "the beings were absolved and sanctified, breasts / collected and crushed into crimson dyes" (8-9). By using terms fraught with religious significance, I am able to metaphorically explore the destruction and sacrifice that sometimes accompany the creation of artwork. Murphy's idea of

metaphorical focus has allowed me to view each riddle as a poem with metaphorical resonance.

### **On Solving the Riddle**

While the reader may correctly guess the real-world object to which the speaker refers, the emphasis on solving the riddle foregrounds a utilitarian function to the riddle, which risks neglecting its poetic resonance. When a riddle asks the reader to offer a solution, it highlights a tension between metaphor and the literal object. For example, when the creature asks the reader, “Frige hwæt ic hatte” (say what I am called), the reader may name “axe” or “tree” as the poem’s solution. Yet at the same time, privileging the answering of the poem’s literal question may lead the reader to answer “to the letter,” wherein the poem’s solution can only ever be “a riddle” or “a poem” itself. Paterson’s notion of a text-absent tenor is significant here; the gap between a concept, or vehicle, and a literal object, or tenor, can never be bridged if the reader thinks in purely literal terms. Rather, by recognizing Murphy’s notion of metaphorical focus and deemphasizing the naming of the literal solution to each riddle, the reader is able to regard a riddle as any other poem.

W.H. Auden’s poem “The Question” considers this very tension. The poem meditates on the act of riddling and in its final line, “The Question” secures its relation to the riddle by asking, “What has been dark and rich and warm all over?” Notably, the poem supplies no answer to the question it poses, and which is granted significance in the poem’s title. (58). In *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, Rainer Emig comments:

What a question without an answer does, however, is attract attention to the power of language—not as an expression of something, reality or a higher truth, but as an entity in its own right. This claim of autonomy for language is the poem's ultimate stance when it parodies the old schoolboy riddle "What is black and white and re(a)d all over?" The answer to the riddle is a page of writing or a book. Writing is that which stresses the non-immediacy of language. It cannot establish a direct link with the world of things, because it is itself part of this world. In its failure to establish a stable connection between thought and reality, language reminds the human being of the isolation and alienation that are the price of consciousness. This is what Auden's poem "The Question" signals through its very lack of an answer. (18)

Emig suggests that the act of riddling, or posing a question with no answer, underlines the sense of isolation and alienation encountered when a writer attempts to capture his experiences of the world through language. The riddle also, however, affirms the autonomous existence of language in the world, and suggests that language is itself distinct and meaningful.

In his essay "Charms and Riddles," Northrop Frye suggests that the riddle, in referencing a real world object through metaphorical language, stands between materiality and abstraction. He says that within a riddle, "word and thing are frozen in two separate worlds, and the reality of each can be expressed only by the other in its world. This paradoxical deadlock is precisely the essence of the riddle" (145). Frye's use of the word "deadlock" suggests a paralysis wherein not only is no answer given, but the reader is trapped within the riddle's spell. However, Frye also figures the riddle as an attempt to reconcile this paradox between vehicle and tenor; he writes, "the real answer to the question implied in a riddle is not a 'thing' outside it, but that which is both word and thing, and is both inside and outside the poem. This is the universal of which the poem is the manifestation, the order of words that tells us of battles and shipwrecks, of

the intimate connection of beauty and terror, of cycles of life and death...” (147). While Emig suggests the gap at the core of the riddle accentuates the isolation between language and experience, and which therefore grants autonomy to language, Frye inverts this tension. To Frye, the riddle’s ability to unify language and things as separate and together at once is perhaps what enables it to celebrate the ordinary as mysterious.

### **Charm and Riddle**

Frye’s comments on charms also inspired me to explore Old English charms when writing my manuscript of riddle poems. Whereas Frye views riddles as rooted in the visual, or the poetic image, he asserts that charms are derived from songs: “the primary associations of charm are with music, sound and rhythm” (123). Unlike riddles, which are rooted in imagery and narrative, the charms are intentionally laden with alliteration, rhyme, and repetition of sounds which should be spoken aloud. Through its hypnotic qualities, the charm is given an innate meaning; speaking a charm aloud realizes its meaning. Frye also connects the charm to the spell, which when spoken aloud is designed to ward off evil or heal the speaker. This understanding of charms inspired me to write riddles about supernatural objects such as a fairy circle and a wishing well.

Further, in my poem “Repeat this prayer,” many lines are borrowed from Old English charms, or spells for healing various ailments. The charm’s power often lies in naming the evil thing that one is attempting to thwart, calling attention to the talismanic properties of language. This act of naming implicitly links it to the riddle, which conceals the name of the object. I therefore view charms and riddles as two components of one similar desire to understand the mysteries of the world that surrounds; the charm names

the object in order to master it, and the riddle conceals the name in order to mirror the incapacity of ever mastering it. Where the riddle offers imagery, the charm offers rhyme and music. Frye writes:

Charm and riddle illustrate the fact that literature, with its combination of rhythm and imagery, is intermediate between the musical and the pictorial arts. They also represent the contrasting aspects of literature we call sound and sense, rhyme and reason. These two factors, taken together, show that the riddle, in particular, illustrates the association in the human mind between the visual and the conceptual. (124)

It is important for my riddles to acknowledge the tradition of Old English charms in order to emphasize the innate musicality within the riddle, and also to explore the significance of naming that occurs in these dual genres.

### **Poetic Influences**

Poets and riddlers that have influenced my manuscript include Canadian writers Earle Birney, Jay Macpherson, Jeremy Dodds, Mary Dalton, Jacob McArthur Mooney, Carmine Starnino, and American poet Nick Montfort.

While Earle Birney did not write riddles as such, many of his poems use caesurae, kennings, alliteration, and demonstrate the influence of Old English poetry. Like many poets, Birney sometimes uses caesurae simply as a tool of punctuation, without tying caesurae to the constraints of alliterative verse. In “Vancouver Lights,” for instance, Birney uses caesurae in place of commas and periods, granting physical space to the page: “About me the night      moonless      wimpls the mountains” (1). In “Anglosaxon Street,” Birney’s caesurae do signify hemistichs of alliterative verse. “Anglosaxon Street” also uses numerous inventive kennings such as “picturehoard” (29) meaning cinema,

“learninghall” (18) meaning school, and “wienerladen,” (16) which I quote in my Birney-inspired “Led to the cliff’s edge,” a riddle describing a taxidermic buffalo head in a German Club. Birney’s verse combines Old English alliterative verse and kennings with contemporary slang and, in doing so, captures the feeling of Old English poetry in a bawdy and relentless fashion. Birney’s poetry has been influential in my attempt to imitate the spirit and feeling of Old English poetry.

Jay Macpherson’s riddle cycle “The Fisherman,” published in her 1957 collection *The Boatman*, is important to my acknowledgment of the riddle tradition. Macpherson’s riddles follow the Latin enigmas in their overt naming of objects in the title of each poem, and are the only contemporary riddles I’ve found that do so. She uses end rhymes almost exclusively, suggesting a distance from alliterative verse, but her usage of words rooted in Old English affirms the influence of Old English poetry. Macpherson’s poem “Storm” is of most interest to me because, while it lacks an alliterative meter, it uses caesurae separating each half-line of two stresses:

that outsider  
would ride in, blind steed, blind rider:  
till then wails at windows, denies relief  
batters the body in speechless grief,  
thuds in the veins, crumples in the bone. (59)

It is in Macpherson’s balance of caesurae, modern rhyme, alliteration within each half-line, and Germanic words such as “wails,” “batters,” “body,” and “bone” that I am assured Modern English can effectively imitate Old English alliterative verse without sacrificing rhythm.

Jeremy Dodds’ poem “from *The Exeter Book Riddles*” engages in a mock translation of Old English Riddle 95, demonstrating a looser alliterative verse, wherein

alliteration is present but does not cohere to any strict metre or overwhelm the line. Dodds' poem is written in modern verse that uses rhyme and a longer line-length typically present in Old English alliterative verse. Dodds' riddle offsets every second line, demonstrating a caesura that doesn't separate half-lines of alliterative verse, but instead fragments the longer lyrical lines. This use of caesurae gestures to the Old English tradition without attempting to emulate Old English form and remains very much rooted in modern metre. Dodds' language makes use of English compounds as well as invented kennings to gesture towards the tradition of Old English kennings: "My booby-trapped crystal meth lab/ imploding—the last scattershot flophouse / to shanghai the seaview—takes ten of your constables with it" (10-13). Dodds' "from *The Exeter Book Riddles*" is a contemporary riddle that very much engages with the Old English tradition, and has helped shape many of my poems' lyrical lines and compelled me to invent my own compounds.

Mary Dalton's sequence of riddles "I'm Bursting to Tell: Riddles from Conception Bay," from her book *Red Ledger*, offers enigmas thematically centred on creatures and scenery of the sea. Dalton's riddles fall closer to the Latin *Ænigmata* both in scope and language. Her poems offer short lines that usually revolve around one image or analogy to supply their clues; no poem is longer than eight lines, while most are five or six lines in length. Dalton's description is in some lines sparse and ambiguous, and in other lines rich and contemporary in its use of modern slang. This range of description speaks to the enigma of the natural world, and the deep divide between humanity and nature. I was most inspired by the first-person speakers found in each of Dalton's riddles, which infuse her poems' sea creatures with a confident and sometimes cocky voice. Her

“ricochet-minded” octopus in riddle 9, for instance, proclaims, “Like a jilted lover / I spurt ink in anger” (4-5). Dalton’s poems would not lose much by naming their subject overtly, much like the Latin riddles, as their mastery lies in the simplicity of the line and exact language of description.

Jacob McArthur Mooney follows Dalton’s riddles with his own series in his 2011 collection, *Folk*. While Dalton's riddles describe natural objects associated with the sea, Mooney's riddles describe objects of contemporary technology found in Toronto's Pearson International Airport. Given that *Folk* explores the 1998 Swissair Nova Scotia crash, Mooney's airport riddles seem to riddle in an existential sense as well. The first riddle begins: "The utmost altar / of the technocrat religion. Believe in me. / You'll have to. Wait and I'll wink you / Onto land" (61). This poem explores the faith that airport passengers must place on runway lighting to bring them onto land, and guide them in the dark. This riddle offers a frightening juxtaposition between the winking runway lights and the 229 deaths of the 1998 crash. Mooney’s riddles, and their ability to capture enigmatic encounters with the mechanics of an airport, have led me to fashion *Riddlehoard*’s technological objects as biological creatures with distinct personalities.

I first began to look at Old English forms after reading Carmine Starnino’s series of poems “Carnage” found in his collection *Credo*. In section v of “Carnage,” the speaker lays out his mission of preserving archaic and obscure English words: “Words I’d like to get into a poem: eagle-stone, ezel, / cornage, buckram, scrynne, waes hail, sillybubbe. / Think medieval, think Old English, think so archaic, / so orphaned, so disregarded, so unused they seem / each to disappear into the slow, self-searing glimmer / of their vanishing” (1-6). In using these forgotten words, Starnino asserts a link between past and

present that made me excited to read poetry and engage in my own salvaging of the past. However, I did not want to imitate Starnino's project by using specific archaic words. Instead, I was interested in using Old English forms, and so I investigated the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book.

In his collection *With English Subtitles*, Starnino includes six riddles. These riddles are similar to the Latin enigmas in length, but actually seem closer to the Old English riddles. First, Starnino's riddles resemble Dodds' riddle in that each second line is offset from the text, offering a caesura of sorts. Further, while Starnino's riddles are not written in strict alliterative verse, they are occasionally alliterative:

Fondle me and I'll chalk your fingers black.  
If I seethe crimson then the more softly  
I'm blown on, the brighter  
my arousal. Wet, I hiss. (38)

The "f" sounds in the first line alliterate, but the "hard-c," "b" and "s" sounds also recur throughout the poem. Further, the answer to this poem seems to be "coal," which, belonging to the natural world, evokes the many nature riddles found in the Exeter Book. The poem also features a double-entendre, making it similar to the Old English "sex riddles" of the Exeter Book. The other riddles in this series feature an emphasis on the natural world, and a metaphorical engagement with the human body, most often sexualized. Starnino's "Six riddles" show the influence of the Exeter Book riddles while at the same time modernizing their alliterative form.

In *This Way Out*, Starnino engages in a different sort of riddling, one that has helped to shape the third section of my *Riddlehoard* manuscript; in the series of poems titled "The Strangest Things," Starnino explores encounters with specific artefacts found

in the world. These artefacts include “Weeping Willow, Parc Angrignon,” “Abandoned Fence Post, North Hatley,” “Roadkill Unidentified, Hwy. 401,” and “Ball Floating, Lachine Canal.” These poems first of all resemble the Latin riddles in naming their intended subject in each poem’s respective title. The poems also resemble the Exeter Book riddles in granting first-person speech to non-sentient objects. It is also worth noting that Starnino’s presentation of everyday objects as “the strangest things” aligns his poems with the Exeter Book’s exploration of commonplace objects as mysterious creatures. In the poem “Smell of Something Bad, Kitchen,” for instance, the speaker proclaims, “I’d suggest you put me out of mind / but know too well / how the barely noticed, / once spoken / becomes the unwelcome detail you can’t ignore” (9-13). These lines communicate a common experience of how noticing a specific detail, in this case an unpleasant stench, can lead to an obsessive focus upon it. In these poems, Starnino animates non-human artefacts, and engages in an existential riddling that is humorous and deeply moving.

Nick Montfort’s *Riddle and Bind* was also useful in developing the third section of *Riddlehoard* and my interest in existential riddles. Montfort’s riddles do not overtly resemble Old English poetic forms, and are generally written in iambic pentameter. One of his riddles, “The Spectacle,” draws similarities between the execution chamber and the theatre and in doing so, points out the absurdity of rhetoric used to justify capital punishment: “Because we want / for things to not repeat, and think that by / creating such a non-repeating thing, / repeatedly, we’ll put an end to lethal / acts on other stages or in other rooms” (“The Spectacle” 8-12). Montfort’s execution riddle demonstrates how riddles can ask ethical or existential questions about modern rituals. As the questioning

nature of the riddle seems well suited to question the way humans live socially, I am also interested in considering larger questions that arise from forming riddles. In my execution riddle “His servants fed me,” I have found the riddle form useful in bringing attention to the absurdity of the ritual of capital punishment that, when closely examined, cannot be “solved” with a simple solution. My riddle reveals that the creature within the dungeon of capital punishment is “not a heinous beast, but a hooded man,” or that the capacity to kill lies in each human being and not in an outside force of evil.

Even non-poetic riddles offer inspiration. My interest in riddles developed when I recently reconsidered the question “Why did the chicken cross the road?” The answer is a pun: “To get to the other side.” On the one hand, the solution describes that the chicken literally crosses the road to reach the other side of the road. On the other hand, the metaphorical solution implies that the chicken crosses the road in order to be hit and killed by a car, thereby reaching *the other side*, an idiom for the afterlife. Here, we have a chicken who wishes to explore his mortality and discover what it means to be alive, a knowledge attainable paradoxically through death. This existential chicken highlights my interest in exploring questions that may lie beyond the limits of human knowledge.

### **Part I: Say what I am called**

The poems I’ve written about objects accessible to both contemporary readers as well as the Anglo-Saxons follow the tradition of Old English riddles describing everyday objects. In the form and content of these poems, I establish a link between my own experience of the world, and the shared experience of the Anglo-Saxons.

Some of these poems, such as my riddles describing mead, a fountain pen, a book, and the sun, are directly influenced by Old English riddles describing the same objects. Other riddles are modelled more loosely on Exeter book riddles; whereas the Exeter Book features a riddle describing wood, I've written a poem describing a tree and its seeds. While the Exeter Book features many poems about the sun, stars, and moon, I've written a poem describing the constellations. In my poems describing vegetables and other items from the natural world, I've attempted to speak to universal encounters with nature, which many of the Exeter Book riddles encapsulate. In the first section of *Riddlehoard* I make greater use of kennings and compounds than in the other sections. In my use of kennings, borrowed and invented, I attempt to link my riddles to Old English riddles through the form of the poem.

In the case of my riddles that describe writing tools, I am invoking the Old English riddles describing objects found in the scriptorium. There are approximately ten Exeter Book riddles that refer to books, quill pens, and inkhorns. Old English self-reflexive riddles meditate on the task of writing and riddling, and offer a poetics of riddles. In the Old English riddles written about books, and inkhorns, themes of destruction are at play; Exeter Book riddle 26, for instance, describes a creature being ripped, dipped, stretched, and otherwise tortured in order to create the vellum pages of a book. This mutilation, however, leads to the existence of a bible that makes its reader wiser in soul and able to transcend material existence. Further, the poems describing inkhorns reflect in an elegiac style on the battle undergone by the stag prior to the separation of one horn from its twin. These poems place emphasis on the tool's materiality, and in some cases they suggest the physical sacrifice that creativity entails. I

have tried to capture these same themes in my own writing riddles; in my pen riddle, for instance, I attempt to speak to the divide between the literal tool of the pen, and the human mind that guides the pen.

Approximately fifteen Exeter book riddles describe animals, including but not limited to chicken, ox, oyster, fish, goose, and nightingale. Of these riddles, only a few are written in the third-person. All the rest are spoken from the voice of the creature itself. In the case of the third-person riddles describing ten chickens, a cock and hen, and some swallows, a first-person voice is perhaps impossible since the riddle describes multiple animals rather than just one. In speaking from the perspective of the animal, the Exeter riddles retain a sense of wonder at this unknown animal world. Some of the animal riddles describe the torment suffered at the hands of man, while others anthropomorphize the animals as beautiful singers and women. *My Riddlehoard* manuscript lacks the wealth of animals described in the Exeter book. Part I instead features descriptions of a fur coat, a pearl, and a snare. Each of these riddles describes man's role in bringing death to non-human animals. My riddles, which focus on humanity's treatment of animals, differ from the Exeter Book's portrayal of animals in order to draw attention to the divide between humans and non-human animals.

In "Why Look at Animals?" John Berger asserts, "to suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a nineteenth-century attitude backwards across the millennia" (4). That is, to view animals solely in terms of the non-sentient objects they become and produce is to ignore that animals "are sentient and are mortal" (4). In the Old English inkhorn riddle, the stag is considered as the inkhorn it produces, but the poem also shows the stag prior to his horn's separation

from its “twin,” suggesting the poem views the animal not solely in terms of the object it produces. Berger traces the erasure of animals due in part to the prevalence of Cartesian dualism, which “bequeathed the body to the laws of physics and mechanics, and, since animals were soulless, the animal was reduced to the model of a machine” (10). What is lost through such ideology is an animal’s autonomous presence; Berger suggests animals have disappeared from daily life and have become estranged from the human world, a fact demonstrated perhaps paradoxically in their reduction to spectacle, and the commercialization of animal imagery: “The zoos, with their theatrical décor for display, were in fact demonstrations of how animals had been rendered absolutely marginal” (26).

While animals exist as a text-absent tenor in many Old English riddles, readers in past centuries have successfully guessed each animal’s name, and granted recognition to the chickens, oxen, and various birds that hide within these poems. In my own animal riddles, I depict the marginalization of the animal world by erasing their presence within the riddle. While the Exeter book described animals, my poems describe only the tools designed to kill animals, and humanity’s treatment of animals. My animals are not only text-absent tenors, but are also conceptually absent. In “Dragged from the garden,” for example, the solution is text-absent, but the poem does not describe a living animal; it describes a fur coat, therefore erasing the animal’s autonomous existence from even the solution of the riddle. Similarly, in my riddle describing a pearl, the animal is regarded only in terms of what its body produces.

The title of Part I, “Say what I am called,” draws attention to the formulaic phrase used in many Old English riddles, sometimes as a taunt. I have used this phrase as the title of my first section to emphasize how this section of *Riddlehoard* most resembles the

Old English riddles, from my direct borrowing of objects and themes, to my use of kennings and alliterative verse in the form of the poems. This playful question lies at the core of the riddle genre, and is important in acknowledging the tradition of riddles.

## **Part II: My face is my mask**

The second section of *Riddlehoard* mainly describes items of technology found in the modern world that the Anglo-Saxons obviously would not have encountered, thereby illuminating the distance between past and present, or myself and the Anglo-Saxons and their riddles and views of the world.

The items I describe in this section first include household appliances such as a coffee machine and a ceiling fan. Thematically, these poems centre on desire, the divide between bodily hunger and spiritual transcendence, and the relationship between master and servant. In “I must wait as he sings,” for instance, the master/servant relationship is a complicated one; while the speaker must serve his master, his master ultimately rewards him with the prized treasure he so much desires. In this poem, I envisioned a similar relationship between the Old English Eorl, or master, and Ceorl, who received a cut of the profits if he fought bravely in battle. In the poems that emphasize the hardship of the machine or appliance, such as “I whisper softly,” I was partly inspired by *The Dream of the Rood*, wherein Christ’s cross actually speaks. Granting a voice to inanimate objects is one way that riddles defamiliarize the reader’s experiences of an object.

This second section of riddles also includes poems of the urban city such as an ATM and a parking meter, and items of entertainment such as a record player, television and tennis ball. Similarly to the Old English riddles, I describe many of these objects as

wondrous, mysterious, and otherwise unusual. In drawing attention to physical objects of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, my poems reflect on what earlier generations might have considered as magical, and distance the modern reader from preconceptions of these objects. I also explore aesthetic tools, as in my poem describing a camera, “With one circle-eye.” In this poem, the speaker describes being “born out of light,” hinting that he is a divine creation in addition to being physically welded together. The speaker further says that he immortalizes his subjects, but he also transforms them into “giant and terrific sights,” perhaps suggesting an underlying mystery to the artistic process.

The riddles towards the end of Part II describe a run-down vehicle, roadkill, livestock travelling in a transport truck, and an abandoned car overgrown with plants. In this series of riddles, I wanted to reflect on the role of transportation and technology in the modern world. In “They prance in woodland,” for example, I describe roadkill instead of a living animal such as a fox, which is described in the Exeter Book. The roadkill exists as an unknown shadow that “performed secrets” the speaker cannot recognize, or the mystery of non-human existence that the speaker cannot grasp. In describing roadkill, I seek to illuminate the disparity between animals in their wild habitat and their death at the hands of a human invention.

In “A pair of eyes,” I further explore the gap between humans and the non-human animal world. The poem describes the fragments of an animal’s form visible through the slots in a livestock truck. In showing only parts of the animal, I hoped to speak of the fragmentation that occurs when humans consider animals in a purely agricultural sense rather than as sentient creatures. Berger’s thoughts from “Why Look at Animals?” have helped to shape my theoretical goals in this section of poems as well. Berger suggests that

when an animal perceives man, “the animal scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension” (5). Non-human animals are separated from humans through their inability to communicate through language, but man shares this non-comprehension as well:

The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. (5)

When an animal perceives man, man finds the recognition of his non-comprehension staring back at him; he is unsettled to see himself through the eyes of nature. In “A pair of eyes,” the animal’s dark pupils peer back at the speaker and emphasize the non-comprehension that occurs between humans and animals. In ending this series with “Sprouting towards sky,” I had hoped to affirm the presence of the natural world and the fleetingness of human existence. Even through the presence of human destruction, plants continue to grow, curling over the rusted motor of an abandoned truck.

In these riddles, the phrase “my face is my mask” speaks to a tension between surfaces and interiors. NHL goaltender Lorne “Gump” Worsley originally uttered this phrase when asked why he refused to wear a goaltender’s mask. Worsley’s phrase is immortalized in a Weakerthans song “Elegy for Gump Worsley”, and an article by David McGimpsey, which describes Worsley as “the last goalie to play without a mask and who, when challenged on the wisdom of this clearly heroic practise merely commented, ‘My face is my mask’” (47). This idea of masks also speaks to the irremovable markings found on an animal’s fur, the masks of identity, and how a riddle masks its solution while at the same time revealing it.

### **Part III: To get to the other side**

My third section of riddles meditates on artefacts, and encounters with particular objects such as a taxidermic buffalo in a German Club, Tylosaurus bones in a museum, and a Roman cameo of Emperor Claudius portrayed as the god Jupiter. Through description of encounters with specific objects and description of non-physical objects, these poems engage in a type of riddling that asserts the strangeness of the world. Part III features many poems describing sacred objects, or objects used in religious ritual such as a grave, a scourge, and a burial cross. Other poems describe ideas such as death, metaphor, and speech. Many poems explore transcendence of physical form, or the attempt to get to the other side of existence, in terms of both mortality and the poet's attempt to capture more than physical reality and material objects. In this section, the riddle's emphasis on describing physical objects gestures towards the desire to reach beyond physical existence.

In these riddles, I come closer to the defamiliarization experienced between the reader and her encounters with objects of the material world I've suggested occurs within the Latin Riddles, which name their subject overtly in the title. By revealing the answer to the riddle, the Latin riddles seem to remove emphasis from solving the riddle. Further, when reading the Latin enigmas, readers may find their preconceptions of various objects challenged through the metaphorical language that each riddle asserts. In Part III of *Riddlehoard* I enact a similar defamiliarization not by naming my object overtly, but by describing an object so specific and particular that any ordinary reader has little hope of solving it. By removing emphasis from this task of solving the poem, I am then able to

consider how metaphor might enable the reader to view the world in new ways. In continuing to ask the reader that formulaic phrase “Say what I am called” or some variation of it, I bring attention to the difficulty of naming the literal object correctly and establish the importance of metaphor in describing the world.

Many of the objects I describe in Part III are increasingly particular, and describe such artefacts as the Black Stone at Mecca or Saint Ambrose’s corpse in Sant’Ambrogio Basilica. Other poems in this section do not describe physical objects at all, but rather ideas and occupations. For example, one of these riddles describes humankind in general, whereas another describes an archivist. Some of these poems, such as “Repeat this prayer” and “Let crisp vellum,” do not overtly resemble riddles and instead ask an implicit question. Many of the poems in Part III are far more self-reflexive than the other poems in the collection, and describe poets, riddles, and poetry. I also use a greater frame of reference in order to acknowledge the tradition of literary riddles inspiring my project. In describing modes of existence, or historical artefacts that have no physical existence, I hoped to explore riddles as metaphorical vehicles that describe non-physical, and perhaps even non-specific, tenors.

The title of this section, “To get to the other side,” refers to my interest in existential riddles, or those riddles that ask what lies outside of the realm of human knowledge and admit their failure in discovering the answer. Many of the poems in this section describe death, bones, graves, and other objects surrounding human mortality, and the desire to reach beyond physical existence and grasp some knowledge of order or reason when there is none to be found. These poems stray the furthest from the traditional form of Old English riddles: my alliterative verse is loose, my lines almost completely

lack kennings, and I employ at times a highly fragmented line, while at other times a nearly iambic lyrical line laden with end rhymes. Part III therefore establishes that form alone does not define the genre of riddles.

I had initially thought of the riddle genre as defined by a text-absent tenor, but in the case of the Latin riddles which reveal their tenor, this definition does not fit. I propose, then, that the riddle is defined in part by form and in part by a desire to get to this other side of knowing—to ask what cannot be answered—coupled with an encyclopaedic urge to capture experience through a catalogue of objects. It is for this reason that Aldhelm, the “founder of riddling in England,” and Symphosius, the Latin author of the *Ænigmata* which served as Aldhelm’s model, wrote one hundred enigmas, and were followed by Tatwine and Eusebius writing one hundred riddles each (Baum xi). The Exeter Book, in its nearly one hundred riddles, similarly features this encyclopaedic impulse. *Riddlehoard* is my attempt to speak to the capacity of metaphor in describing those experiences of the world that are otherwise hidden.

**I. Say what I am called**

## I smile earwide

I ride the chariot rail, roam the billowroad  
trammelled to soft skies, my travels taking me  
where flycatchers soar. I flutter like a mastcloth,  
my woundhue sign against a seafoam of green.  
I call on far countries, comfortclothe the swarms  
of ritereaching hands, heads twisted, mouths ajar,  
watching as I wander the warped stony lane.

It takes me all day to traverse my footpath  
so I smile earwide and wage timepassing tricks;  
as faces follow, I make figures swoon.  
But I'm prickle edged and my ice piercing gaze  
throws poison darts deep into the eyes  
of the bunches waiting breathbated, limbquivered.

As I wave and depart, withdrawing by day,

I leave their outfits lifeless, deflated.

When I reappear they'll praise me as a god.

Say what I'm called and speak my name.

### Leave her and she swells

What maiden speaks in murmurs, moans  
as you hold her curved round waist, salivates  
as you caress her neck, clasping her buffed skin,  
filling her drawn lips? Leave her and she swells.  
She trembles and sighs seething in slow suspense,  
rumbling in fury and raising hot breath.  
She foams at the mouth, frothy and back arched  
before squealing out, singing a sweetsong,  
heaving and gratified, full fed, released.  
But study her shape and she shies, ceasing  
her cooing and calms, clearing like the sky  
after a stormy fog, wavesilent, still.  
Who is this creature? Call out her name.

## He harnesses a rage

I heard a bastard hovering about me,  
an absolute nuisance nestled by my side,  
clinging, like a child clasped around my neck  
he cries out, sputtering, clamouring to speak.  
When I temper him, tending to his whims  
I listen to him blather, the burden I must bear.  
Stifle him and he shrieks, shouting louder  
the firmer he's held down. In fierce winter winds,  
he harnesses a rage racking my breastplate  
with all his foul force, fists constantly flying,  
battering my bones a bludgeon, though feeble.  
Who is this creature, this constant pest  
growing ever galling though I grip him by the throat?

## **These men dig fingers**

These stout monks meditate in shade,  
preserve their pallor, protect wheyfaces  
and bulging crowns. They cover their bald  
skulls with drooping decorative hoods,  
stately as tophats shielding the sun  
or drenched in hail, hanging snoods.  
These men dig fingers dirtcovered into earth,  
fat bodies heaving as the hems of their skirts  
tatter in the soil, toes wriggling  
like mice tails, tantalized by prayer.  
The monks remain through the rain and grime  
as their hats wither, wilting and darkened.  
They keep tongues keen, singing  
as they head indoors to the heat of the sauna,  
harkening to sow a sweet melody of  
sustenance filling our stomachs with warmth.  
What are these creatures? Call out their names.

## **Split us down the middle**

I'm afflicted with shyness, sheltered in mother's  
warmth, hidden in her wares, waiting out the frigid  
hoarfrost of spring before my growth spurt  
when I still feel young, still yearning for sun.  
Cloistered in mother's coat, her zipper tight,  
I'm squeezed alongside my seven brothers.  
We're identical twins and I'd dread to be torn  
from our safe beds where we babble and sleep,  
holding each other's hands, gorging our  
fattened plump bods, brimming and sweet.  
One day we'll awake in the dawn and scream  
as curious hands clasp our swollen forms  
and squeeze our sap. Split us down the middle  
leaving our spines snapped, guts spilling.  
If you can imagine this menacing scene  
be bold with your voice and reveal my name.

## She'll quench your thirst

I've heard whispers of a wise witch  
slogging about stones, secret beneath seas.  
Her cove is calm, cloistered, and she content  
to pass the time peering into skies,  
her sight framing scenes as a mirror,  
clouds circling celestials reflected below.  
This weird oracle's aphorisms are sought  
as gallant men gaze into her eyes  
and she figures fables of faraway futures,  
her visions veering on voyeurisms as visitors'  
hopes hinge on hollowed falsehoods.  
As you peer down the drawnout passageway  
to catch a glimpse of her glimmering guise,  
feeding her bits of bread broken into copper crumbs,  
she'll quench your thirst, coolwatered, immersed.  
Draw up the dreambucket dangling by the brackets  
of the thick rope, rails creaking as they rub  
against cool stone, and seek her crystalsights.  
A taste of days, dreaded or anticipated,  
if one is so bold to breathe her name  
and seek the services of this soothsayer sage.

## He tears crevices

This deft dagger delves into scales  
of a twilight scather teeming with claws,  
its teeth slicing, slashing shards  
sharp as slivers sifting to the ground.  
Tough as waves, he tears crevices into  
closepacked cobble, carving the canvas  
of ancient stone or sprouted seeds.  
Featherlight, he's flung with fierceness  
but his foe never fades, and it forges  
stronger bulwarks from burdens it bears,  
growing ever longer though grated to the ground.  
While his battle remains burgeoning, he's beguiled  
by the immortal roar of its rival, and longs  
to fly through dense forests, lightened, freed.  
What creature seeks the scalps of its enemy,  
cries through its teeth a terrifying song?

## I grew out of her torment

I was born beneath sea, sheltered by the strong  
cradle of my mother's clasp. Her skin was  
rough, knuckles knotted by rugged coral.  
Waves of sand washed upon our home,  
beat upon her shell, bludgeoning, relentless.  
But my mother's body blocked me from evil  
and I grew out of her torment, the grievous terrors  
of those harsh years, the injuries she harnessed.  
In her soft embrace, I was sheltered and secure,  
fascinated by the iridescent fantasies she wove,  
whispering her tales to distract me from wounds.  
I bloomed stronger as her senses faded and  
I gleamed with the hoard of all her hardships, held  
tentatively as a firefly flickering in the night.  
Her final breath birthed my lustre, but  
the blow was savage; her back snapped  
with one swift surge of the stream's surf  
and she broke in two, beaten and empty.  
As I floated away, I felt her breath  
brush upon me, as if beaming from within,  
a glimmer too scarce to save me from greed  
of man's thirst for treasures and trove.  
Like a petal too swiftly plucked, I was torn  
from the deep bottom of the ocean's bed  
dumped on the shore, drowned in the air.  
Now I sit stony on a spotless throne,  
paraded on streets, plagued by my fate.  
Surmise from my tale to say who I am.

## **These phantoms floated**

A giant pricked pins, plucked  
tiny holes in hopsack sheets,  
spun thread through swansilk.

As light pierced out of looms, tulle  
shone from behind the blackness of night.

Sitting below these sewn sheets,  
I read wonderful words woven in the  
divine tapestry, tales adorned  
in dazzling twine and delicate string.

I saw creatures stitched in chiffon:  
a great bull bolting through gates,  
clinging twins coupled in pain,  
the lion's roar, loud and reverberating  
a scorpion's shell and spiteful claw.

These phantoms floated in frames, called  
men to their knees, to marry with names,  
to tell of their futures, their fortunes and fate.

What are these creatures? Say what I mean.

## Listen as it sings

This creature speaks from a silent mouth.

It cannot walk but wriggles feet,

It has a head yet wants a mind

and has a body but is not alive.

Listen as it sings from a slender throat

when curious patrons press their lips

against its polished puckered plate.

Blow a kiss and breathe life

inside its fragile silver shell.

You who master its measures and means

unlock the treasures trapped in its keys.

What is this creature? Call out its name.

## I scattered my sons

I was the landruler and liegelord,  
master of moat and meadhall.  
As scops trilled songs, plucked lutes,  
I grew steadfast, shrewder than youth.  
The days still supple soft without roots,  
my breast stretched skyward and bloomed.  
When my skin turned stone hardened,  
my warmth left me, and wisdom greyed.  
So I scattered my sons seaward, sent them  
to seek kingdoms strange and uncharted  
on hard travails and harrowing skies.  
My eldest stitched a parachute shawl  
and rode on wind, racing through air;  
he soared through forests, flew over peaks,  
and settled nations, unspoiled and new.  
My next descendant was devoured by swords,  
sharpened blades that broke his form.  
He was whisked away to wander the abyss  
and was stronger, fiercer when finally reborn.  
One son clutched his claws into brutes,  
And chased them far into feudal lands,  
defeating their charges as they fell and retreated.  
Now his army lives where their legion stands.  
My youngest flew into fires, pined  
for the right timing to unravel and fight.  
He clashed against the chaos of darkness

and arose from ashes, ruling upright.  
Say who I am, if you can discern  
the face of my story and the fate of my sons.

## Dressed in white caps

I found these creatures crouched together  
at the edge of a forest filled with dense trees.

Their circle was wide, stretching across  
rocks and wildflowers, flavourful herbs.

The grass was lush and greener in the halo  
where they stood chanting and singing spells.

Dressed in white caps, they clutched hands  
and repeated ancient incantations, invoking  
sprites and elves, spirits from other realms.

I watched them caper in the cool night  
and dance together as they tittered, screaming  
with laughter of long and lascivious nights.

What music they played what pranks they performed;

they might have stolen my soul, carried  
me away to enchanted and charmed places.

Spellbound I was, spoiled with their tales,

but as I outstretched my arms to see if I  
might touch the semblance and shatter their curse,

the mirthful vision vanished as quickly  
as their pleasant magic had appeared, leaving me  
alone and surrounded by a ring of white hats.

Who are these sprites? Say what I mean.

## I grew in slumber

I was birthed from the bubbling core.  
Scorching fires soothed my skin  
as I slept for days in a darkened cave.  
I spent centuries in shadows, hidden  
from sunlight and clouds, the caressing breeze,  
cascading ocean, crunching leaves.  
I grew in slumber stronger, sleeker,  
lulled by rain, droplets pattering  
upon cool stone, seeping into earth.  
My days were brightened by dazzling beacons,  
glittering crystals that calmed and twinkled.  
In the rough rock and rigid clay  
I transformed into a pure and precious form,  
my smooth skin and silky sheen  
cherished only outside the cave's walls,  
a treasure stolen for a sliver's gaze.  
Now foolish men fight for a glimmer  
of my semblance, shards stonehidden,  
clanging metal, mining, chimes.  
What am I called, cave dweller,  
man's dearest marvel and crown?

## His spine was strong

This creature was born in backwoods, culled  
from thick growth where green thistles  
stretched to skies, sprouted shoots.

His spine was strong, surging with life force  
of flowing streams and flickers of sunlight,  
their breath feeding the flames of his hearth.

When he grew taller he was taken away,  
stripped from his home, skin swathed  
with heavy bandages, hedging his body  
in thick sheathes and threaded shrouds.

Now his delicate skin is adorned with dressings,  
intricate designs tattooed in black  
and red, drawings detailing the rise  
and fall of men, fortunes laid out  
in stars and moons, songs and charms,  
stories passed down for centuries gone.

He holds the riddles Rameses hears,  
in the face of a man and form of a beast,  
the language and stories the lion speaks.

What holds these secrets? Say what I mean.

## Man's siren and muse

This jewel sprouted in scrubland, grew  
from fat bundles of black fruit,  
its plump skin spurting sumptuous  
juices, bursting on bated tongues.  
It danced alongside a sweet and golden  
nectar, the toil and trophy of hordes  
of busy drones, buzzing with work.  
Together, these rare riches birthed  
a magnificent treasure, man's siren and muse.  
Now she sings in busy banquet halls  
filled with conversation and friendly cheer,  
her voice seducing the swarms of men  
who come to gaze at the glint of her shape.  
But one touch upon her teasing lips  
awards a strong and striking sting,  
the source of her power distilled in song,  
her virile mastery, her venomous tongue.  
Who is this temptress, transforming men  
into pleading servants, slaves to her kiss?

## His arms poised

This longnecked lackey lurks  
at the edge of forests, feints at trees' feet.  
Statue still, he skulks in silence,  
his arms poised for approaching steps.  
His master's rule reaches far throughout  
this creature's veins, the core of his threads,  
infecting his hand with fated deeds.  
His bloodlust beckons, browbeats, pulls.  
For when innocent souls pass across  
his road, this fiend wraps his arms  
firmly around frightened throats,  
tightens his clasp as creatures shriek.  
He steals his victim's voices, reaps.  
Who is this creature? Say what I mean.

## Dragged from the garden

I wandered once a wondrous realm  
where I grazed on fruits of a fertile garden,  
roamed through lawns, lazed in light air,  
tasted from seas and sundappled streams.  
I nibbled the flora and nectars trickling  
from fragrant plants, a filigree of green,  
my feast laid out in a fortune's hoard.  
While I fed I was freed from torments  
and fears of any fiend or lifethief.  
These days were precious, peacedazzled, until  
unguarded and trusting, I tasted the fruits  
of one beckoning tree, forbidden to eat.  
Its glimpse fixed my fancy, glint captured,  
its glimmer caught in the gaze of my eyes.  
As my tongue felt that flesh, sunripened  
and its flavours drizzled down my face  
a twolegged creature clutched my neck  
stole my worldstrength, strangled my breath.  
Dragged from the garden, daggers slashed  
my skin as I was ripped from my safe haven.  
Snatched from my hearth I was stark and alone  
and I noticed, then how naked I stood  
in the winter darkness of these dismal woods.  
Now I wander walled walkways  
of man's township, trapped in cold  
concrete enclosures, confined to my labour.  
I parade the streets, a prisoner of men,  
fated to remain royal adornment,

his constant guide and guilty companion.

I am the warmthgiver, my weary guise

no longer fitted to my fair glade

but the clammy skin of curious men.

If you witness my weakened stature

unmask my meaning and mention my name.

## **It welcomes men**

I saw a wondrous figure all wrapped in gold,  
beaming at the grove's brim, surrounded  
by strange and beastly brutes. The wilderness  
heaved against its splendour like hawks onto prey.

Though this being's body lay in the earth,  
the ground covered in clay and sand,  
its head reached to reverent gates,  
stretching upward to a sacred realm.

Now it welcomes men who wish to flee  
this earth's seductions, swarming with evil,  
and ushers those who sing the songs of glory.

Our hallowed kin, higher ascends  
to this holy kingdom in hallowed skies.

Who sows the flame that flickers within  
this radiant star, shining in darkness?

## **My skin was polished**

I hung on the mantle of my master's mail,  
felt his lifestrength surge through his fingers  
as he clasped my body close to his chest.  
My skin was polished and smooth from the graze  
of my lord's hand, his lingering touch.  
Though my face shines, my smile is fierce,  
my teeth sharpened with the strop's blade  
into one honed edge heaving with rage.  
With one swoop, my lord swings me through air  
and I thrust my teeth into tenacious foes  
hacking at their waists, hewing their form,  
slashing their arms, slitting green throats.  
Who am I, sleek slayer of wonders  
brandishing death as demons hold swords?

## Watch sparks fly

I am a creature true to corners; my edge  
is straight as arrows, unswerving, carved  
sharp as the heads of hurled spears,  
speeding through woodland, whirling, fierce.

My kiss presses upon pursed lips  
of drawn swords, daggers honed,  
when soaked with oil and submerged in skin.

Watch sparks fly as flames embrace,  
leaving surfaces restored, anew,  
sending shivers into shadows of men  
as dulled malice meets my gaze.

What creature am I, keen and devoted  
to the wormblood and woundhoe?

## **It left a long trail**

I saw this creature soaring into seas, neckdeep,  
dipping in lakes, its legs blackened  
by the dark mud drawn from below.

As it leapt onto land it left a long trail,  
a series of footsteps seeping into sand,  
its black marks marring a white beach.

I followed these tracks as they formed curious  
structures, figures shifting in shape.

As it wandered, the creature crawled and coughed,  
leading me back into the black seas,  
dragging his feet and drinking in thirst.

When finally the bird blackened the earth's  
surface, it leapt off the loam and left.

It flew back into the flight of skies,  
wings extended in a wondrous sight,  
feathers fixed for flight, focused  
as though guided by a guardian's hand.

Who is this creature? Call out its name.

## A whisper caught

A curious creature was clothed in thickwares,  
stood spinestraight where I sought her.  
I found her arms angelreaching,  
her hands twisting, hanging limp  
to the earth, intertwined with her two feet.  
For centuries she circled stone, weaved  
her limbs, embracing bedrock, carved  
her form and laid, leaving traces  
in bright pigments, paint washed away.  
When she spoke to me in these secret ways,  
I found her voice familiar but distant,  
a whisper caught in wind, a flicker  
of shadow, fading words sustained,  
crosses held by the heathens' grip,  
a riddle creature called by this name.

## **II. My face is my mask**

## **I must wait as he sings**

This mysterious creature calls to me each morning.

I rise from my dungeon, drag my body  
down the long hallway to the demon's hearth  
where I cater to his fierce and constant hunger.

I pour buckets in his parched throat,  
watch the floods of fluid cascade  
as he gulps in thirst, guzzling gourds.

I measure sacred minerals with precision,  
the dirt's musky scent drifting through air,  
and scoop meal into his salivating mouth  
as the beast pulsates, consuming his feed.

I must wait as he sings, his stomach grumbling  
as his pangs subside and he assesses my offerings,  
his ravenous appetite now at peace, fulfilled.

Once I've waited, weary and worn,  
my master rewards me, releasing the grasp  
he holds upon me and for a moment I'm freed.

I drink the nectar of his deeds and design,  
cleared from this ritual, calmed for a spell.

What is this creature? Call out his name.

### **Beat him and he stifles**

This creature answers    silent queries  
posed by faceless    figures scattered far  
across the plains.    He plays an endless  
stream of melodies,    a series of birdsongs  
as if twittering below    your balcony's window  
each morning hour.    His hands move like  
the sun rising across    the sky, sounds  
blasting ever louder,    blaring as you lie.  
Beat him and he stifles    speech, ceasing  
his bleating for a moment,    muted for a spell.  
In time, he'll chatter,    his channels fixed  
to a medley of voices,    reverberating forth,  
rousing your slumber,    spurring your day.  
A nagging nuisance,    he's nevertheless loyal.  
His tasteless spiels    temper your sleep.

## I'm a breeding ground

When I'm fed it's in fits: feasts of fodder,  
acrid aromas of ale and excrement,  
children's upchuck, its chunks like chumpchange.

Burrowing bums embezzle my bounty,  
shape makeshift shanties or chic chateaus for  
the alleyway's waves of wanderers and waifs,  
wretches reeking of such repugnant rubbish,  
such salacious smut it sickens me to my stomach.

I'm a display for spraypaint masterpieces, a plague  
of palimpsest prose produced en-route,  
a treatise of tasteless tags, sketches  
of women's breasts bareskinned and bulbous,  
primitive portraits of protruding pudenda,  
aggravating alcohol addled altercations.

I'm crawling with transactions of tantalizing tranquilizers,  
ne'er-do-well negotiations, narcotics and nefarious goods,  
urban usuries and ubiquitous euphemisms.

I'm a breeding ground for illbegotten bastards,  
a backalley bazaar or beggarly trading ground.

My name isn't mud but it might as well be,  
moulded to the earth as mire nurtures me.

## **My heart remains hard**

I wear scaled armour, a stalwart shield  
defending my smooth and supple flesh  
from the scores of suitors who'd spring to peel  
my coat of mail and clasp my meat.  
Although I soften and sweeten with time,  
my heart remains hard and heavy as a stone.  
If left, my green will languish and fade,  
my skin withered, wrinkled and grey,  
seared with the cruel sword of time's passing.  
With yearning paws and plagued anticipation,  
hungry fiends heave their maws  
upon my skin and slice my costume,  
devouring my innards, velvet within.  
So scrape out my insides and score my skin,  
if you are so spirited to speak out my name.

## He grabs me by the wrist

This creature's constant chatter calms me.  
He hums mantras, a hypnotic rhythm  
hearkening to the beat of my heart's pulse.  
As waves stretch on shores and retreat,  
this muse meditates in meagre coves,  
shelters secrets, sighs and sings to  
the clink of rosary beads, counting incantations.  
This varmint's glued to me, grants my survival,  
stays up all night while I snore and dream  
and wakes me in morning wagging his hands.  
He grabs me by the wrist and we greet the day  
together, my sidekick on this strange earth.  
Who is this wise mage, walking round the  
goldlined paths, of a glimmering face,  
keeping to the pace of his selfsung parade?  
Listen closely and say what I mean.

## Witness his feats

This garish creature glares across the room  
bright as beacon's blush, beaming  
on his lofty shrine, sacred and revered.  
He accepts your presence, permits pleasantries  
as rabble's flock, flailing for a rendezvous  
with the great sultan, stealing glances  
at his fortune hoard, hidden from sight.  
Crowds line up to worship and witness his feats:  
with one swift sleight, he transforms a single  
tepid handshake into heaps of treasure,  
cashnotes flowing from a fattened change purse.  
But heed the condition to his copious fortune:  
only those wary that all wealth is fleeting,  
and ruled by time's eternal passing  
will hold pure hearts, unpolluted by poisons  
of earthly greed. They will guess his guise,  
speak the sequence of his secret wares  
and reap the rewards of wondrous riches.  
If you stand good and surmount goldlust  
then shed your fears and say what I mean.

## His voice was low

A creature called to me on kinsmen's lands.

His voice was low so I listened close  
to his distant cries, his echoed howling  
as wheels race, reeling, and whirr.

In a compeer's cabinet, covered in webs,  
the catacombs of my kith's cloisters and chests,

I found the beast who'd battered my soul  
beat upon my heart, hardened my throat.

As I whisked him from his hiding spot,  
he took the form of familiar faces,  
life-like portraits peering back at me,  
but I was absent from the semblance  
my figure missing from the frame.

Now apparitions hang on my hearth, as shrouded  
spectres weigh on my spoiled spirit.

These wraiths confine me to fantastic sights  
as I'm caught inside his spell, captured by his song.

Who is this creature? Say what I mean.

## Dust filled my lungs

I was empty as air, my arms and legs  
cradling my abandoned chest, a blank  
page, my heart hollowed, my soul  
carved out like seeds scooped from ripe fruit.

I tarried, a shell stripped of all life,  
as dust filled my lungs, I languished, deflated.  
Finally, I encountered a figure whose form  
of brightest pigments pressed into my bones;  
he filled me with his shape, his sensual silhouette,  
as my limbs wrapped around his body.

Now I surround stunning scenes,  
content to wallow in the colours and textures  
of landscapes, tinted still lifes leaping,  
portraits that threaten to thrust right out  
from the confines of my cloistered chest—  
to jump from my being, to burst from the page.

Say what I am, enclosing great art,  
seek my semblance and speak my name.

### **She's a stubborn slave**

This creature scrubs, cleanses, and shines  
her master's wares, the mounds he dirties,  
remnants of his fabled fetes and soirees.  
She's a stubborn slave and saves her solvents  
until each salver is soiled each receptacle stained.  
Platters stay stacked, piled on her waist  
as she waits for suitors to sully their plates,  
until the pyramid is palpable and a ponderous weight.  
She moves in the night while her master sleeps,  
her breath humming with a hammer as she beats  
upon the blotches and batters on the grease.  
Her magic is swift and as her master awakes,  
his fixtures restored to their former majesty  
a pristine assortment prepared for his party.  
Who is this creature, her caresses immaculate,  
transforming tumbledown untarnished, renewed?

## A patchwork brigade

My brother guarded these grounds before me.  
He traversed the castle's courtyard, treaded  
the sunscorched land, shovelled trenches.  
He scattered his troops and they scouted the terrain,  
kernels of warriors not yet consumed by war.  
His reach was wide but the rivals he faced  
were fierce foes, ferocious in their fire.  
The first attack arrived on foot,  
pounding his men and piercing their shields  
with sharp claws and searing teeth.  
He defended the soil but swarms lay slain.  
The next siege struck by air,  
the plane's wings pummelled the land,  
as sharp devices devoured his men.  
When the masses of his men were consumed,  
I was brought in to battle his adversaries.  
But my troops were timetested with  
sundamage, weak with weathered skin.  
We stood in the heat sweating, and thirsty,  
a patchwork brigade packed closely together.  
Though we fended off the forces by foot  
and by flight, our final test was the heat  
of the sun, the damage it dealt to our skin.  
We stood yellowed, soldiers withered  
by the desert drought, the dryness of air,  
as younger armies arose from below  
orchestrating a swift and sudden takeover,  
their rough swords searing our mail.

We were a far cry from our former crowns,  
the green years of youth, but were sheltered  
as our arms sprouted and shielded us from sun.

We grew from old graves, gulped rain.

## **They stand unflinching**

Dragoons terrorize townships' citizens,  
march down mainstreet, spaced at intervals,  
their greytone garbs grave as gloaming.  
They stand unflinching, their sombre faces  
eyeball each passer, police the lineups  
of petrified souls, pressing for compliance.  
To sate their decrees each drudge must pay  
a toll, and place their tariff into the pig's bank,  
change clattering into the chief's coffer.  
No being is exempt from the exorbitant fees  
of these patrolling troops who parade their greed  
and dole out tickets to thralls who disobey.  
Those who dare to defy these dictators  
and stand against the gall of their cruelty  
will find their pockets poorer, pride robbed,  
rendered an example by ravenous wraiths.  
Who are these pitiless oppressors, plaguing  
our streets and ruling the rabble as slaves?

## I whisper softly

From a lonely vantage I view my master  
seated on a wooden stool, surrounded  
by the fond embrace of his brethren and kin  
while I wait for a single stroke of his hand.  
At sundown at last my lord sends for me  
rouses me from waves of wintersleep  
and still slumbers, slinging me into play.  
At a moment's flick of my master's fingers  
I instantly switch at the signal and supply  
a burst of light, a luminous beam  
gleaming on all fat and glowing faces.  
Some days my ruler requests my travail  
and I brandish long boards that I wave  
through sweltering heat, summoning a breeze,  
fashioning wind and wielding a whirl.  
Eventually my master mops the sweat  
from my dirty brow, the dust I've breathed  
throughout the day, and thanks me for my duties.  
When he is alone, his allies long away,  
I whisper softly and sing into his ear,  
quietly as a murmur humming melodies,  
a background comfort or calming sound.

## I soar below stands

I was born out of clay, clothed in a yellow coat,  
caught in between the court and the clouds,  
the perfect white lines and my latex bones.

I'm confined inside a quadrangle cage,  
my enclosure tended by two masked guards,  
the lattice frames of their fretwork faces  
stinging my skin striking me silly.

Their invisible hands harness my movement,  
guide my trajectory, govern my flight  
and I dare not diverge in direction or might.

Though I'm shackled to the structure and shape  
of my rulers' rhythm and ruthless drive,  
I soar below stands, sweep in swift gusts,  
tear upon the runway and tumble divine.

The prize of my voyage verges on degrees:  
my push towards the tapestry of net  
and pull away from the pulse of its form,  
balance that lies at the brink of all art.

Say who I am, a strange creature  
or wingless bird who braves flight.

## **My arms are sharp**

I'm the tallest posed in prairie towns,  
standing beneath the sun's beams,  
known for my stoic stance as I pray.  
I outstretch my three thick arms, gaze  
towards sky, and wait for a sign,  
a surge of wind to settle my soul,  
or summer breeze to steady my breath.  
In this dazzling air I anchor my feet  
into one firm trunk, treestiff, sturdy  
and I dance, waving my digits in this routine:  
First, I reach high to the heavens and stars  
then I lower my arms, level to dirt,  
my calm rotation like a clock's rhythm.  
My arms are sharp swords slicing through air  
or graceful wings weaving through storms.  
I'm alone but I feel the lay of my fathers  
and from this prayer great power emanates.  
I energize my elders through evenings dark,  
light the lamps of lords across lands,  
illuminate pens leaping onto page.  
Who am I, cloistered but cloud reaching,  
frozen in stillness but freed in a breeze?

## **My soul rushes**

My body is guarded in a glass cage,  
bones too fragile to face hoary  
squalls, or whorls of wind that bite  
my skin, like teeth tearing sinew.  
I have no arms to assess the scene,  
no face to perceive or fingers to feel  
the bonds of frost or fever's thralls.  
When heat rises, my heart heaves;  
my soul rushes in ridges and ribs  
pulsing with crimson passions, or surging  
with silver poisons that plague my mind.  
In the cold I grow groggy, numb,  
metal clotting my marrow's core,  
but remain a guide to gallant men.

## His life's fuel

This servant rides alongside men,  
clutched by eager clinging hands,  
his life's fuel lingers in his veins  
and fills his heart's hollow chambers.  
To some, he creates comfort in cold lands,  
his blood better fit for fiendish beasts,  
but to most he's the bane of bitter poisons,  
the bringer of a sweet and sickening spoils.  
Strike him to catch the source of his spark,  
as the flame of his soul smoulders, alight,  
siphon his blazes, his burning tome,  
to feast on venom, a befouling vice.  
Who is this creature? Call out his name.

## I can pick up a tune

I live in cycles, smooth circular  
motions that trace the timeline of my life,  
hours spent at a constant continuum and speed.  
With one arm conducting, I create melodies,  
beautiful songs, scored by my baton.  
I can pick up a tune from any point;  
my form is precise as a pin needle,  
as I play the same strains *ad nauseam*,  
never crescendoing or nearing my life's coda.  
But remove my touch from ridges carved  
like traintracks, glued into thick grooves,  
and I'll reverse my aim, veer off course  
into darker realms, my dance roaring  
with devilish screams and satanic shrieks.  
Who is this voice, hanging upon me,  
searing inside me, speaking in tongues?

### **With dozens of fingers**

This creature's tall arm towers over servants,  
summoning ghostly spirits, heroic  
swarms that sing from centuries past.

With dozens of fingers she fashions intricate  
melodies, honouring the memory of great men  
fallen in battle or fading in age,  
their lives suspended in sounds of the page.

This creature's many mouths purse  
lips together, blow breath and send  
sweet whispers, startling or subdued,  
praising tunes that pay tribute.

The hairs of this creature are cultivated in strains:  
plucking or sustained, they shudder and sigh.

Who is this creature, casting her song,  
with masses of limbs moving as one?

### **Their shells were hard**

These creatures gathered on cactus plants,  
flocking as falling flakes of snow,  
swarmed on branches, like scales on shoal.  
Their shells were hard but they held inside  
a deep bloodhue buried beneath  
the casings of bodies and crawling legs.  
Immersed in boiling broth and baked,  
the beings were absolved and sanctified, breasts  
collected and crushed into crimson dyes.  
Now this creature waits on a wooden board.  
Watch as his insides are smeared on a lath,  
a crimson shade as scarlet bleeds.  
Who is this creature? Call out his name.

## With one circle-eye

I was born out of light when beams fused  
my body to face, my being to frame,  
my features suffused with celestial might.  
My vantage was at first oldfangled, crude  
as my viewfinder flickered, and gaped,  
allowed ghosts into my glorious sights.

When my focus flared with flecks of sun  
I shuttered with spasms of sudden unease,  
my rods and cones crippled by the glare  
of cruel demons with dreaded red eyes,  
my depth perception distorting appearances.

With one circle-eye, I invite oversights,  
but with proper radiance and my ruler's patience,  
the sights I perceive are saturated projections.

In a single blink and burst of light  
subjects are immortalized, meagre entities  
suspended in time and space for a glimpse,  
transformed into giant, and terrific sights.  
Even without a figure I still produce a frame,  
the world spliced into shadows and held.

Say who I am and speak my name.

## They prance in woodland

I saw these creatures strewn as trash,  
beside castoff paper and sticky popcans  
scattered reckless at the side of the road  
discarded from some speeding coach.  
They darted once from dappled ponds  
to fields filled with flowers and beasts,  
as summer's light shone on the backs  
of their manes and sinew, muscles sleek.  
They prance in woodland, practicing charms,  
games that no human can heed or solve,  
chanting the songs our senses can't grasp,  
darting to mounds our minds cannot find,  
the holes beneath earth our eyes cannot see,  
the spots in the leaves our skin cannot feel—  
What crimson stains cast on concrete,  
slivers of flitting shadows, flattened  
like a page, whisked into wind, and mangled.  
What fence we've caught these creatures inside,  
the sharp metal shards scraping on skin,  
what fur sticky tar, tarnished by sun.  
What creatures are caught, crushed by an eye,  
ground in the mirror of the motor's sheen?

## A pair of eyes

This creature is hidden behind walls,  
concealed in confines clasped tightly shut,  
or whisked away in wheels and hutch.

A pair of eyes inside steel slots,  
peer into mine, pupils brightened  
black as onyx, an unblinking stare.

I touch a tuft of tangled fur,  
long hairs flecked with fleas and dirt,  
a tail flicking flies crawling  
on scuffed hooves, stone hardened.

I see such pale nostrils flared,  
smelling soured piss on matted hair,  
the grating wet with waste and gore,  
or poison methane masking air.

Still, I discern two docked ears  
through tiny cracks carved in the wall  
and hear the moans, muffled and dull,  
the clang of cage, the cold, hard metal  
and two dark pupils placed upon me.

## Sprouting towards sky

This grizzled donkey guzzles rotgut  
trots slopes, slogging up steep  
winding mountainroads, its rear aching,  
heaving burdens, backbreaking, hauled  
to the desperate orders of its owner's screech.  
It brays, wearied as it weaves in and out  
of busy gridpaths. It gravitates to smooth  
and low declines, longing to drift  
like its ancestors, unencumbered, speed  
through narrow paths, plush and airy trees.  
It's not suited to showoffs, has no shiny coat  
to cherish and prize, no polished hooves  
reflecting its master's illmannered expressions.

It should be tied beside a sandtrap,  
traded for a foal, filly, or colt,  
a younger breed, better able to push  
the stone like Sisyphus, sustained, infinite.  
As it pauses its toil to taste from a stream,  
its breath lurches from lungs, and it wavers,  
the greyhaired nag the hoary steed.

I spied the rusted stallion resting  
atop the haunted hills of a fortress town.  
Its hide was squalid, seedy, fleabitten,  
worn by decades of winter storms,  
tired in body and broken in bones.  
It stood stationary, the sorry mare  
wounded by time's unwavering rule,  
frozen as a statue, faltering, lame.

When its breath faded and blood slowed,  
the figure transformed into a tree's shell.  
From cold metal casing emerged  
a green stem, spiralling around  
its owner's bones, between its ribs,  
writhing in its skull, sprouting towards sky.  
It reached upwards rising from the frame  
of a curious creature called by this name.

### **III. To get to the other side**

## Led to the cliff's edge

This royal baron once roaming plains,  
surged through prairies, until stitches in peddled  
blankets plagued, and poxstained stars  
led him to the cliff's edge, clinging, culled.  
Now he whispers secret words, mutters  
restless songs. His sight is blind  
despite widened eyes, his woolly fur  
a hint too snug for this hot spell,  
his indoor haunt. His hearth overlooks  
the punkrock crew crooning below,  
the bandstand a backdrop to belligerent dialogue  
or slurred drawl, sampling auf Deutsch.  
This meagre beast's mounted to his task:  
he monitors lederhosen masquerading as black tie,  
bootshaped beer and Bauhaus-Tracht.  
He spies condiments on tincarts, bratwurst  
swept aside amidst alcohol orders and  
weatherworn wanderers *waddling back wienerladen*.  
This creature's fate is figured weird  
but his new position, displayed overhead,  
supplies his visage a superior view.  
Who is this beast? Say what I mean.

## Her skin was wearied

I found this creature in a faraway land,  
of towering skies and stretching fields.  
Hidden in the hills, her humble hermitage  
stood at the peak of one steep cliff.

There, on smooth slab of stone,  
this creature meditated, unmoved by heat,  
the sun's glare, or gales of wind.

Her skin was wearied by winterstorms,  
her expression faded and façade worn,  
but her face was firm and figure rugged.

She shared with me silent songs, the origins  
of buffalo and deer, bearclaw and raven.

She said nothing of the horse, its hooves or hair  
but traced the footsteps of her tribes with precision.

She recalled the shape of shadows of the past  
closer and truer than any testimony or book.

I asked her to stand with scores of kinsmen  
and sing the secrets of this soil and sky.

But at this her stony stare spoke no more  
and I was left only a trace of her touch  
cold hard grit, grooves carved in stone.

## His golden glint

Claudius stuttered, spoke strained,  
stiff consonants captured in his throat.  
Tied by tongue, his twisted thoughts  
sputtered saliva as staggered sounds  
faltered speeches, his defect caught.  
The sardonix carved into a sleek cameo  
depicts the figure's form in relief  
against a blue background,  
his golden glint gilded to jewellery:  
slackened drapery swathed around waist,  
raised sceptre in steadfast hand,  
eagle perched, the patron beast,  
victory clutched, the icon held.  
Adorned in gold and dressed in pearls,  
the semblance seeks a slender neck.  
He casts his chain, he carries its weight.  
Claudius transformed, his tyrannical reign.

## The crack of his whip

This deft creature casts his tails  
upon the backs of blasphemous men.  
He flays skin, sinks his teeth  
into tender flesh, tearing strands  
of bruised muscle from mortal bones.  
Men who encounter the crack of his whip  
are wiser for the wounds they wear,  
better and holier for the blows they bear,  
lifted higher to heaven's gate,  
on lighter wings than worldly legs.  
Who is this beast, bestowing punishments  
in the graven hand of the guardian of skies?

## He sang charms

This little man lurched in a forest  
where he danced around a raging fire,  
his contorted face reflecting flames.

He sang charms composed of secret  
and magical rhymes, rhythmic and hypnotic  
designed to lull his listeners asleep  
so he could steal the source of their life.

As he repeated his strange and nonsensical words,  
the incantation pulsing with power of night,  
he dreamt of concocting a delectable feast  
baked out of children bewitched by his charms.

But a messenger heard his hysterical song,  
spied his true form skipping in grass  
and read the shape of his shadowed guile.

When the brave soldier spoke the name  
of this ruinous sprite he unravelled its magic,  
breaking the spell of his sorcery and song.

This goblin raged, grew furious,  
and in his torment, tore at his flesh  
splitting apart his skin into two,  
ripped in half his heart into shards.

Name this creature and escape from his charms.

## He flooded the earth

This creature trills from tree branches,  
his vantage overlooking the orange and yellow  
leaves descending in loose hordes.

His face is his mask. His faded markings  
frame his sharp beak and shining eyes  
brightened by whiskey or whirling wings  
as his speech swirls with a subtle smirk.

This trickster soars in swift speeds,  
darting between the trunks of trees  
and perching quietly on crowns of men,  
his game known by no mortal beings.

Once the creator carved the earth  
to his liking, shaped its land and seas.

But this creature craved chaos  
and flooded the earth, filling its form  
with rushing streams and surging seas.

As water filled the world, this trickster  
infused its mould with magic and song,  
a weird creation of charms and guile.

Now all beings beam with his glow,  
gleam with this spell, his secret gift.

## **Beneath a golden altar**

This bishop's regal resting place  
is in a glass enclosure, a gleaming cage  
where his body has long laid on display,  
bones glossy and grit with glaze,  
beneath a golden altar and angel's gaze.  
Dressed in vestments, he's doomed and fated  
to tarry, ever flanked by twin figures  
on either side, saints treasured and  
clothed in white with crowns of gold,  
palm leaves saved for centuries.  
In this crypt beneath the basilica, the skeleton  
sleeps in slippers, snoozing in a mitre,  
his eternal slumber, his smiling teeth  
like sleeping beauty if the sultan never came,  
like briar rose if reaping was her game.  
A ghost in a window, a waking dream.  
Who is this creature? Call out his name.

## His life's work

This creature's letters lie in long boxes  
weighted with dulled and dusty volumes,  
his annals filled with faded scribbles,  
inkstains, blots, and blemished pages.  
His lifetime's work languishes on a shelf,  
was tallied once and now waits for readers  
to finger his parchment, peruse his lines  
and bring new life to buried tomes.  
It was not a poet's pulse we expected  
when we unearthed an earmarked leaf of  
students' tenuous annotations or praise  
and studied his lists, his ledgers scrawled.  
We found his chronicles cloistered, arcane,  
his writing illegible in the lamp of day,  
lighter as we held it lifted to our eyes,  
slighter as we clasped it, seethrough in our hands.  
Our fingers searched its symbols and signs  
for a key to solve the source of his riddle  
—*for want of thorn for want of edh*—  
What is this creature? Call out his name.

### **Point towards it**

Did it fall from space or soar, formed  
from remnants of Eden's idyllic garden?

Pilgrims claim kissing its surface  
grants you powers, a prehistoric strength.

Press your hand upon its veneer;  
Feel the smooth, stone, hardened;  
capture its glint, gleaming adamantite.

If you cannot touch its cool sheen,  
then point towards it, its towering throne,  
repeat seven times, its silver frame.

Black as night or near as sight,  
name in words what withstands being named.

## What hearts pulsed

What torchlit shadows touched these walls  
as figures danced in the flickering flame,  
smudging charcoal specks that remain,  
handprints aligned in an animal's shape.  
What voices whispered within this cave  
as fragments of flute flitted through air,  
its melodies silent as songs long unsung  
amidst a boy's footprints pressed into mud.  
What hearts pulsed at the hearth's domain  
with visions dreamed or demons feared,  
or stories told in the stillness of night  
in pigments crushed and painting smeared.  
What droplets of rain dripped over bones  
covered the surface with a calcite gown  
a smooth clay carving or ocean's cast,  
a marble throne a bear skull's mask.  
What glaciers covered this earth's veneer—  
a throbbing vulva, the venus's mirror,  
her darkened warmth, her drawn open legs,  
(What did she dream? What did she fear?)  
her brazen lips a bison's face.

### Repeat this prayer

To thwart rivals,    thaw tufted  
Saxifrage; rake    root from stem;  
pluck leaves    and petals; grind  
fruit and seeds;    compress and squeeze,  
smear over skin;    swallow, reap.  
To defy waterelf    disease, drink  
chamomile steeped    in mugwort; fuse  
woundwart with nettle,    waybread and fennel;  
boil this mixture    in the malicestriker's flame;  
consume this potion    with lamb's cress and pray.  
For a sudden stitch,    seek an elder's  
counsel; seize    a swarm of bees  
and consume the bounty    that begets mead;  
chew on chervil    and crab apple leaves;  
take a knife    and trace its blade.  
To scald dwarves,    speak rhymes;  
cast smooth pebbles    across ponds;  
twirl around    three times;  
Repeat this prayer,    on pendants engraved:  
*I read the night;    I know your name.*  
Words grate    against a wen;  
Sing this song    and seek these names.  
*Shrivel as a seed    stuck in the sun*  
*Shrink as a creature    caught in a charm*  
Repeat three times    upon your tongue.

## I dug my fingers

This garden bloomed in grey earth,  
as roots writhed in rutted ground,  
thronging with worms and winter's squalls,  
its tubers sunk into stony mounds.  
I dug my fingers deep into clay,  
felt the flowers forming beneath  
and fingered the buried buds and petals,  
their hardened stems, their heavy seeds.  
These blossoms didn't beam with life  
the sunlight's glow, and supple glades,  
but fell among shadows of ancient wraiths,  
they slumped and paled, shrivelled, faded.  
Now these florets' thorns and thistles crowned  
with lilies lie beneath the loaming and grow  
seaward, lower into the silence of earth  
clawing deeper into darkness, down.

### **This magician wove**

I found a wise and weird creature  
seated in a tall, secluded tower,  
a spire overlooking vast seas and fields,  
working in silence her solitary task.  
She toiled through threadbare nights,  
her finger's tired twill weaving  
droplets of red dye into filament,  
her blood into fibre, body into thread.  
This magician wove the warp and weft,  
transformed ply into pictures divine,  
her tapestry spoke unspeakable words,  
spun into cotton like clouds onto sky.  
Who is this servant, ever spinning twine  
stringing sentences, speech into time?

## **His servants fed me**

*After Alden Nowlan*

A shrouded baron breeds in a secluded  
fortress, held in by a fence of razor  
claws, a distant cave that few enter,  
and no man once inside can leave.  
The corridors of his castle are lined  
with the skulls of those he's swallowed  
before me, their bones buried in dirt  
their cries echoing through catacombs.  
A man in a crisp collar and black suit  
safeguarded my cell and stayed my sins.  
His servants fed me and stitched my scars  
kept me living and cured my gall.  
One day, I was strapped upon a sheeted bed  
and wheeled down weary hallways  
to a bright room beaming in white,  
the spotlight shining on my sickly skin.  
I lay pinned on centre stage, writhing  
in my dressings, dazed as a creature  
gored me and the gallery rejoiced.  
He placed a black bag upon his face,  
not a heinous beast, but a hooded man.

### **Its branched arms**

This tree sprouted from solid earth,  
disturbed soil, shovelled sod,  
reaching downward, roots into firth,  
leaching water from loam and clawed.  
Its trunk pierced twilight, and stretched  
its branched arms, outward, broad  
like the splayed wings of an insect fixed,  
his head gazed heavenward, pinned.  
Who is this creature cast in straight rows,  
marking the ground, ghosts on gallows?

## What ink stained

Leofric, bishop, found a great  
and curious book. It carried potent  
words and charms, enchantments to cast  
like pebbles on sea, swept into storm.  
Exeter's bishop, or Edward's ceorl,  
Leofric strengthens his library's shelves.  
What knife sliced its sleek pages as  
a hewing board, or holder of cups?  
He pores over vellum, peruses the page,  
his fingers pressing upon parchment,  
tracing the outline of letters on leaves.  
What ink stained his skin's ridges?  
What words did he speak wondrous, aloud?  
His riddles to solve, his rhymes to repeat.  
Leofric's shadow longing, dulled.

### What mastery he holds

He is the gift of gods, the gilded father  
of riddle songs, singing charms  
cast over all earth's creatures and men.  
Treeboughs hewn, he carved trunks into  
a sculpted womb. He wound strings  
and plucked melodies, mesmerised beings  
to tremble and sigh, shudder and sleep,  
beasts entranced, spellbound by song.  
What mastery he holds, moving inbetween  
this earth's silent and invisible realm,  
only to descend into underworlds  
and seek his lover lost to darkness.  
Death triumphs when he turns to her  
but this bard ascends in song and rises.  
He seeks silence in this transient world  
but lives, fleeting, in the lyre's embrace.

## **I trill as finches**

I sing hymns on summits high,  
over clearest seas and unclouded skies.  
Light as heartspeech, I am soulsoaring,  
calm as the songbird's brazen carol.

I trill as finches flutter, I warble  
and sing charms captured in breath.  
My ballad chirps as blackbirds call  
in strains of melodies and spirit sounds.

My lowest moans lament on air  
deeper than any mortal man can hear,  
my nocturnes keening in requiem sung.

Who I am, bearer of bass and tenor,  
singer of arias who in silence resounds?

## These creatures surround

What should I call the creatures of earth?

I christen each bird and beast, name  
each furcovered feline, call to  
the smallest insect or sizable fish.

From wings that soar to whirling fins,  
claws burrowing into bending labyrinths,  
these beings surround like seraphs on air.

How shall I honour heaven's guards,  
bliss never fleeting touch without feeling,  
minds with no body that move without form?

I've infinite moments to fashion a name  
and arrange man's artifice against  
the designs of our holy and divine host.

To name these creations carved out of mud,  
not a rib fashioned in rays of light,  
but the singularity, the silencing sound.

Who am I? Hallowed my name:  
I am become death destroyer of worlds.

## As time leads

I dream without waking from sleep,  
feel sun without seeing light,  
drown without drawing breath,  
lie in darkness dearth of night.  
How will I wait for the wanting of life,  
the absence of song, the lack  
of all things while all things remain?  
What is a dream if dreams are not retained  
a dream remembered if ever should I wake.  
I will bid good bye to myself,  
as I ever knew my own name.

## **Its petrified bones**

This creature waits in a winding corridor,  
as ocean sounds and sonorous moans  
escape from concealed speakers, traces  
of The Late Cretaceous. Its relics linger,  
suspended from taut ceiling wires, the  
anatomically correct clayformed figures  
displayed to the left of its petrified bones.  
Mouth agape, its gaze is unwavering,  
its rows of teeth and ribs held together  
and reflecting the smooth artificial skin  
like a funhouse mirror facing into an abyss.  
Who opened its jaw and posed its limbs,  
or polished the dirt from its deep siesta?  
A child's memory is moved by the scene;  
I encountered myself in a mirror here.

## A gathering of trees

His wellwrought walls are worn with age,  
his homestead stands abandoned,  
surrounded by tall birchtrees, thick  
trunks of apple planted by roughhands.

I took a long trail worn down  
where acorns lie collected on the forest's  
floor like discarded crumbs, a path  
less travelled than on a long winter's night.

Where the path ended I emerged on  
a gathering of trees not guiding my way.  
What grave holds our grandfather's bones?

A stone marking set behind the church,  
a stone house sitting atop the hill  
where I found this trace and it tugged on me,  
fading faster the further I stepped away.

Like pennies tossed upon stone graves  
or the cool touch of a candle's flame.

Who had a lover's quarrel with the world  
where earthgrip held him gone, long gone?

## I swallowed salt

Speardin brought battlesweat, soaked  
upon my skull, as slaughterdew on brow.  
After war, I railed, raged against fierce  
sky peals, waves that stormrushed.  
They kept me sinking as I swallowed salt,  
drawing aches while I drowned on air.

When I landed, I was lost, left  
by battle kin abandoned, vanquished  
to land and loam, no liegelord to keep  
my fortune's gold or guide my way.

Now I stand stiff as treeroots,  
feet digging into soil, scuttled.

My spirit chest keels into darkness,  
dregs buried, breast broken,  
timeward worn. One day a poet  
will press his pen onto page, pressing  
my plight into verses, pencilling my name.

## Let crisp vellum

Let weary spines speak the wordhoard,  
spells whispered or sung aloud,  
words unhindered held up by hands,  
the warrior's voice wavers, bound.

Let crisp vellum capture swordsleep,  
evade the blood ember's bite,  
corrodes as heaven's candle gleams,  
a flame's remnants flickers bright.

Seek wisdom not in the warrior's tongue,  
in man's fleeting and mortal words,  
but let lipstreams slaughter war  
through treebreakers and bane of wood.

## I sift through soil

*After Seamus Heaney*

I am a humble monk, a meek hermit.  
My mouth is silent in the meadhall, knowing  
not a single hymn or sacred melody  
to revel in strains or venerate in air.  
When the harp found me I fled the feast  
and dwelt in a stable among swine and sheep.  
I slept upon hay and slipped into dreams,  
witnessing sights wondrous and blessed.  
There I sang in glory the splendour of skies,  
the bounty of heavens and holy delights.  
As I woke from sleep I was stirred into song,  
and described the beginning of all created things:

*I sift through soil, salvaging secrets  
hidden below the earth's loam  
as dirt clings to coarse fingers,  
hanging on cuticles, clayheavy skin.  
I unearth moraine, archaic debris,  
wearing at strata, weathered by wind,  
forcing raw fingers raking beneath  
slews of mire and mountains of silt.*

*The dregs bear a burden, breaking the beams  
holding the skyline, descending in streams,  
the rubble and sediment, the remnants and stones  
burying the surface like a blanket of bones.*

*Who am I— hewing hordes of boulders  
into effigies, forging figures into tomes?  
What song arrests me, sung upon waking?*

## SOLUTIONS TO RIDDLES

### I. Say what I am called

I smile earwide (sun)  
Leave her and she swells (kettle)  
He harnesses a rage (cough)  
The men dig fingers (mushrooms)  
Split us down the middle (peas in a pod)  
She'll quench your thirst (wishing well)  
He tears crevices (comb)  
I grew out of her torment (pearl)  
These phantoms floated (constellations)  
Listen as it sings (flute)  
I scattered my sons (tree)  
Dressed in white caps (fairy ring)  
I grew in slumber (gold)  
His spine was strong (book)  
Man's siren and muse (mead)  
His arms poised (snare)  
Dragged from the garden (fur coat)  
It welcomes men (church)  
My skin was polished (axe)  
Watch sparks fly (whetstone)  
It left a long trail (fountain pen)  
A whisper caught (runestone)

### II. My face is my mask

I must wait as he sings (coffee machine)  
Beat him and he stifles (clock radio)  
I'm a breeding ground (dumpster)  
My heart remains hard (avocado)  
He grabs me by the wrist (wristwatch)  
Witness his feats (ATM)  
His voice was low (slide projector)  
Dust filled my lungs (picture frame)  
She's a stubborn slave (dishwasher)  
A patchwork brigade (turf)  
They stand unflinching (parking meter)  
I whisper softly (ceiling fan)  
I soar below stands (tennis ball)  
My arms are sharp (wind turbine)  
My soul rushes (thermometer)  
His life's fuel (lighter)  
I can pick up a tune (record player)  
With dozens of fingers (orchestra)  
Their shells were hard (cochineal)  
With one circle-eye (camera)  
They prance in woodland (road kill)  
A pair of eyes (animal in livestock truck)  
Sprouting towards sky (automobile)

### III. To get to the other side

Led to the cliff's edge (taxidermic buffalo in German Club)

Her skin was wearied (petroglyphs)

His golden glint (Cameo Portraying Emperor Claudius as the God Jupiter)

The crack of his whip (scourge)

He sang charms (Rumpelstiltskin as riddler)

He flooded the earth (Wisakedjak or whiskey jack)

Beneath a golden altar (Body of Saint Ambrose in Sant' Ambrogio Basilica)

His life's work (archivist)

Point towards it (Black Stone at Mecca)

What hearts pulsed (Chauvet Cave)

Repeat this prayer (remedies, Lacnunga)

I dug my fingers (grave)

This magician wove (poet)

His servants fed me (executioner)

Its branched arms (burial cross)

What ink stained (The Exeter book)

What mastery he holds (Orpheus)

I trill as finches (metaphor)

These creatures surround (man)

As time leads (death)

Its petrified bones (tylosaurus bones)

A gathering of trees (Robert Frost stone house and gravesite)

I swallowed salt (Odysseus as Seafarer)

Let Crisp Vellum (speech)

I sift through soil (Caedmon's hymn)

## NOTES ON POEMS

“Led to the cliff’s edge” borrows a line from “Anglosaxon Street” by Earle Birney.

“His life’s work” borrows from “Want of Þ Want of Ð” by Anne Szumigalski.

“Repeat this prayer” borrows vocabulary from various Old English charms.

“His servants fed me” is written after “The Execution” by Alden Nowlan.

“A gathering of trees” borrows various lines by Robert Frost.

“I sift through soil” is written after “Digging” by Seamus Heaney.

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